

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH  
SUNDAY, MARCH 12, 2023**

**HEBREWS 1: 10-2:3**

**“ON NOT DRIFTING AWAY”**

Back in 1859 Napoleon III, the ruler of France, was itching for a war. And Austria and the northern Italian state of Piedmont were starting one with each other. To get France in the fight Napoleon III quickly made France an ally of Austria against Piedmont. And before long the French troop trains were being loaded up with soldiers heading for the area of fighting in northern Italy. As they got on board, to fire them up for the fighting ahead, their officers led them in cheers---“Hurrah for Austria! Down with Piedmont.” But then very quickly Napoleon changed his mind and decided he would rather be on Piedmont’s side against Austria! So when the troop trains arrived in Italy the officers again led the soldiers in cheers to fire them up for combat. But now the words were just the opposite from the day before when they got on the trains. Now they all loudly chanted---“Hurrah for Piedmont! Down with Austria!”. (Acts of War, Richard Holmes, The Free Press, 1985, p. 285)

Sometimes it’s hard to decide which side to be on! At least it was for Napoleon III. Needing to decide----that is the main theme of the book of Hebrews from which today’s epistle lesson is taken. It’s a letter St. Paul wrote to some of the Jewish Christians of his day (and he himself, of course, was a Jewish Christian). Some of the Hebrew Christians were wavering in their faith in Christ. They were starting to drift, giving consideration to leaving Christianity and returning to Judaism. This letter was written by Paul to get them to stop drifting, to stay true to Jesus Christ. As we just heard read a few minutes ago in Hebrews 2:1, St. Paul told them---“we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we *drift away* from it.”

Some of the Jewish Christians were drifting away---into spiritual disaster. St. Paul in this letter wants to wake them up, to shake them up. Thus the stern warning words he wrote in our lesson, in chapter 2, verse 3---“How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?”

What is the essence of this “great salvation” that Paul doesn’t want the

Hebrews to neglect? The essence of our great salvation is Jesus Christ. Jesus *is* our “great salvation”. The name “Jesus” means “God saves”. In Jesus comes our salvation---He is our salvation.

He died on the cross to save us. He rose again from the grave. He taught us how much God loves us. He is the man we tell our children about even before they are old enough to talk. He is the one we call on when we are sick or lonely or in trouble. His is the name we whisper on our death beds. As Christians, He is the very reason we live. He is our friend, our Lord, our savior, our God. Ad so Paul warns us—that if we neglect Him, if we drift away from Him, we are in great danger.

How much He loves us! How infinite is His love for each one of us! About 200 years ago the Norwegian explorer Nansen was charting part of the Artic Ocean. There was a particular area that was thought to be very deep and he wanted to find out exactly how deep it really was. So his ship brought along an unusually long measuring line to put into the water to mark how many fathoms deep the ocean was at that place. The line was put into the water and let all the way down----but it didn't touch bottom. It just wasn't long enough. So the next day Nansen had his sailors collect together all lines and ropes on the ship. They were all tied together and then this long makeshift line was tied to the regular measuring line---now it was very long indeed. Then it was let down into the ocean.....down, down it went. But it still didn't hit bottom. It wasn't long enough. In his journal that evening, Nansen wrote these words----“I have to give up on measuring it. No more line or rope. We used it all-----still too deep to measure!” (“Our Daily Bread”, 10/3/91)

Christ's love for us is like that. Too deep to measure. Too deep to even imagine. And because He loves us so much, we should love Him, too. We should make Him the center of all we are and of all we do.

We should think about Him when we get up in the morning. And when we go to bed at night. We should pray to Him during the day. And come here to worship Him together. We should read about Him in our Bibles. And we should obey all He said there. We should fully live for Him.

Hard to do all that? Sure....but think about hard it was for Him to do what He did for us.....to die on the cross for us.

Some people might think that centering our lives that much on a man born 2000 years ago is rather strange, maybe unhealthy. But it's just the opposite--it is when our lives are centered on Christ that we are truly balanced and healthy.

And if we don't center our lives on Him, then we start to drift away from Him like some of those long ago Hebrew Christians were starting to do. If we have drifted some (or even drifted a lot), then now is the time to stop drifting and refocus on Jesus Christ. It is never too late.

The book Everyday Saints tells stories about things that went on under Communist rule in the U.S.S.R. (I know some of you have read it and there's probably copies in our parish bookstore and/or library). In it is a story about some monks who had drifted far from their earlier love for Jesus Christ. It happened in 1919 during the Russian Civil War during the horrible conflict between the Reds and Whites---guess who won! The Red Bolshevik forces took over a town and, as was common, went up against the Church there. There was a monastery in this town that had become very degenerate over the years-----the monks had few church services, did almost nothing to help the poor, didn't pray, etc. They lived rather high off of offerings people made to the monastery-----they ate very well and drank a lot and some lived in immorality. Some bishop didn't keep a good watch over it and it had really gone down hill!

When the Communists moved into the town, they heard all about this degenerate monastery and decided to make the closing of it an object lesson to the townspeople about how Christianity was no good and that they should leave it and all become Bolshevik supporters. All the monks were led out into the town square and all the residents of the town were gathered together there. The Bolshevik leader said, "You all know how miserable these monks are----how they lived lives of ease on the donations you have made. They all deserve to die for their crimes. But I will give them a chance to live. I have taken the cross from the monastery altar and I am putting it on the ground in front of the monks. If they will step on the cross and spit on it, I will let them go even though we are closing the monastery. If they won't spit on their cross, we will cut off their heads with our sabers."

The abbot stepped forward to speak. He was fat and his nose was red from too much drinking. He turned and spoke to his monks---"Brothers, we have not been good monks. We have not been good Christians. We are a disgrace. Brothers, we have lived like pigs. But brothers, let us die like Christians." And he told the Bolshevik leader that he would not spit on the cross. And the other monks all said the same. And each of them was then beheaded. (Everyday Saints, Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkurov, Pokrovy Publications, 2012, p. 215)

The monks had drifted far from Christ, indeed. But that day they stopped drifting and their souls were saved.

If you have been drifting away from the Lord, you, too, can change----and stop drifting.

Our Lord Jesus Christ came to you when you were baptized. He is in you. He wants to work in your life. It is time to stop drifting and totally focus on Him.

May our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our great salvation, empower us to drift no more----but to fully focus our lives on Him.