**Romans 10:18-11:6** February 3, 2019

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*10:18 I ask: Did they [the Israelites] not hear? Of course they did: “Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.” 19Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, “I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.” 20And Isaiah boldly says, “I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.” 21But concerning Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.”*

*11:1 I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. 2God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don’t you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: 3“Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me”? 4And what was God’s answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” 5So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. 6And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**The Lord Knows Those Who Are His**

When you tell a story, where do you begin? “Well, duh! At the beginning.” Then why do so many movies begin with an action sequence where you have no idea what is going on? You are just thrown into the middle. The answer is: It is to hook the audience. This is no invention of 21st century movie writers. This “beginning in the middle of things” has been around at least since the ancient Greek author, Homer, put the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to print about 800BC. This “beginning in the middle of things” technique is so effective that story tellers still use it nearly 3,000 years later.

Admittedly, this reading is not quite a Hollywood action flick. But it does start in the middle. Now unless you have a chance to fill in the backstory, starting in the middle is confusing. So what is the backstory to the beginning of our reading, ***“I ask: Did they not hear?”*** Who? Who heard, or didn’t? And, what did they hear or no? And, does it matter?

Let’s fill all that in. As you might guess from the title, this book of the Bible was written to Romans. It was *not* a general open letter to all the people of Rome. It was written to the Christian congregation in Rome. One of the questions these people had centered around the Jewish origins of the Christian faith. They knew that Savior of the world was of Jewish descent, a fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures, whose ministry was predominantly to Jewish people. As one might expect, the earliest Christian gatherings started out as mostly Jewish groups. However, over the years the Jewish element became smaller and smaller. Partially because so many non-Jews were coming to faith, but also because fewer and fewer Jews were coming in.

So the question came up, just three decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection: Is God done with the Jews? It was a question in the minds of Christians in this mixed Jewish and Gentile congregation:

**Is God Done with the Jewish People?**

People prefer simple answers. We all do. We want something that can fit in our hands, that we can get our minds around, that we can get into one sentence. Same thing here. An easy answer could be that maybe God *is* done with the Jews. Maybe when they decided that they would crucify Christ, and when his disciples later preached and by and large the Jews didn’t listen, and when this same message was taken to the farthest flung Jewish communities and again rejected—maybe now God had had enough of it! Maybe he was just going to have nothing to do with the Jews.

This idea was around in the Christian church already in the days when Paul wrote this letter, about 60AD. And this thought has been spooking around the Christian church ever since. It has been manipulated by people, yes, some of them even in the name of the Christian Church, as a reason to persecute Jews. Or when not persecuting them, to still to treat them unfairly or as second class citizens.

This thinking, called anti-Semitism, has no place in the Christian faith. In this reading, we will hear God’s word explain why this sin can have no place among any group of Christians.

In our reading the Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to prove that God is not done with the Jews. In the first verse of the reading, where you felt like you were dropped right into the middle of an academic debate, it says, ***“I ask: Did they [the Jews] not hear [the Gospel]?”*** Some people might give the unbelieving Jews the benefit of the doubt and suggest that maybe they didn’t know about Jesus. ***“Of course they did: ‘Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.’”***

Verse 19, ***“Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, ‘I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.’”*** God had spread the good news to the Jews, and he spoke clearly so they could understand. And God went beyond that and took extreme measures to get their attention.

Think of how a young woman interested in a certain young man might get his attention. She will look at and talk to and smile at him. But if he doesn’t show interest, or worse yet, maybe seems to take her for granted, she might just start showing a little bit of attention to another young man, not because she is actually interested in the second, but because she wants the first to feel jealousy stirring in his heart. Sometimes jealousy can accomplish what attention will not.

Which is what verse 19 sort of says God did with Israel. God’s messengers told the Jews, but most paid no attention. Then he started to bring foreigners into his family of believers. God’s intention was that some backsliding Jews would become interested in this Jesus, if for no other reason, than through sheer jealousy. ***“I will make you envious by those who are not a nation.”***

That has worked and still does work for a small number, but not for most. So much of God’s attention rejected. No, the Jewish people have not been rejected by God. He continues to call to them to the blessed forgiveness offered in Jesus, to extend his hand of pardon to them, but he does so to a people ***“disobedient and obstinate.”*** What more could he have done?

Supposed failures of the Gospel do not lie with God who daily puts his offer of salvation in front of people, who daily pronounces to people that through faith in Jesus they are made right with God. It is with the people. They individually reject that message. And because *some* have chosen to reject this message does not mean that God throws an entire race into hell. We know that is not how God operates. God continues to call all people.

**A Remnant of Israel Is Saved**

Moving on, Paul takes pains to prove that though the vast majority of the Jewish people have rejected Christ, they are not rejected as an entire people by God. Half-way through our reading, in verse 1, Paul points out that he himself is a Jew. If the Jews were rejected as a race, then he could not have the faith he professed.

More than that, the Jewish/Israelite rejection of God started long before the Jews’ large-scale rejection of Jesus. In verses 2-4, our reading looks back hundreds of years to the time of the prophet Elijah. In his day, Elijah felt like all Israel had rejected God. They were worshiping idols on every hilltop. Virtually every home had shrines to their household gods. They had killed the prophets of the true God. And when the Israelites found a place where people were worshiping the true God, they leveled it. Finally Queen Jezebel put out a “Wanted Dead or Alive” warrant for Elijah. In panic, Elijah fled the country and on a distant mountainside fell down in a heap of self-pity. Then the Lord God told him, ***“‘I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to [the false god] Baal.’”*** Paul adds, ***“So too, at the present time there is a remnant.”*** God knows those who are his. He knows them. We do not. Even a prophet like Elijah did not. He did not know how God was using the words he spoke, the things he did, to encourage and bring to faith. God told him and us that he has a remnant.

I want you to think about that word: remnant. Being winter, a few of you may have patchwork quilts on your beds. These days patchwork quilts are filled with beautifully matched fabrics. But if you have an patchwork quilt from forty years ago or more, you will notice that the fabrics usually are not so beautifully matched. Do you know why? Old quilts were made of remnants. People often didn’t have money to go out and buy new fabric just for a quilt. Instead they saved all the scraps of fabric left-over from the shirts, dresses, blouses, pants and curtains they sewed at home. Nowadays, in our affluence, we would look at a little piece of fabric the size of a piece of paper and think, “Useless!” and throw it away. But it didn’t use to be that way. Over a couple years and dozens of projects, a frugal housewife could save together enough remnants to make a quilt. That process of saving all the leftover little bits, the remnants that is the picture of God of this verse. When we think that none are left, that none are listening, maybe most are not, but God’s assurance is that even then, he has saved a remnant.

**A Remnant Saved by Grace**

Both in reference to himself and to the Jews of Elijah’s time, Paul takes pains to say that this saving of the remnant was only God’s doing. This is important because we may think that if people get the blame for rejecting God – which was pretty clearly laid out in the first half of our reading – then those who have not rejected God must get credit for a pretty wise choice.

Paul says in verse 5, ***“There is a remnant chosen by grace.”*** Not a remnant who chose, but who were chosen. They were not chosen on merit but on grace, undeserved favor. All credit for our salvation belongs to God the Son who died for our sins, to God the Holy Spirit who planted faith in our hearts, to God the Father who foreknew and predestined his people.

God gets all the credit because he did all the work, and gave salvation as a gift. How contrary this runs to those many who speak of the day when they invited Jesus into their hearts: “My choice.” “My invitation to Jesus.” They want to take credit for what God has done by grace. No! Let all credit be God’s because all the work and love and favor are his!

**Summary**

In a sense, focusing on the Jewish rejection of Jesus is really rather silly. No nation has ever wholly embraced the Christian faith. If one thinks that the Jews ought to be rejected as a race, then what race should not be? Yet in this question, precisely because one people has reacted to the message of Jesus as every other group of people have ever reacted to the message of Jesus, precisely for this reason this reading has value.

It is a warning against falling away, especially to those who think that they are in tight with God. Israel was convinced they were. But most were not. Every time that we hear the word of God, it is a time for us to listen. Every time we read and hear the word of God, we should think of God graciously holding out his loving hands to us. And any time we consider not paying attention, it is time for us to humble ourselves before him.

Another encouragement comes to you every time that you talk about Jesus to your co-worker, your brother, your niece or nephew, your uncle or aunt. However much you feel like you are talking to a wall, remember that picture of God from verse 21, ***“All day long I [hold] out my hands.”*** God is merciful. He wants none to perish. He will speak to them to the last moments of their lives. Be his messengers. God knows those who are his. We do not.

Finally, be encouraged, because you are not the first person to feel the discouragement of rejection. Remember Elijah who thought that there was no spiritual harvest for all the spiritual plowing and planting he had done. Yet God told him, ***“I have reserved for myself seven thousand.”*** God knows those who are his, and he will use what you say and do in ways you do not know, for his chosen remnant.

God give you courage to speak and faith to listen. Amen.