

"The Coming Reward"

Revelation 22:1-6, 12-20

May 8, 2016

7th Sunday of Easter

I'm sure you all remember seeing replicas of those posters which hung in the Old Wild West: "WANTED: Dead or alive; Black Bart and his gang of horse thieves; Reward: \$25,000". Although there were a minimum of words in these posters so that the print could be bigger and attract more attention, you knew exactly what was meant by such a poster.

Black Bart and his gang were wanted in a particular community and it was not to address the chamber of commerce or attend the church picnic. They were wanted because they had broken the law and the higher the reward, the more heinous the crime. Their presence was being requested usually at the end of a rope in a noose on a gallows.

The "dead or alive" part referred to Black Bart and his gang, not to anyone who might try to apprehend them. If the crime was sufficiently horrible, the marshal or whoever was responsible for enforcing justice was given permission to anyone and everyone to "shoot to kill" to stop such ornery outlaws.

The reward part was clear, too. It was to be a high amount, suitable to fit the crime. It was not for the criminals. The reward was given to the one who risked his life to apprehend the criminals to enjoy on his own.

As we conclude our celebration of the Easter season, this picture of a "wanted poster" and a "reward" helps us to understand the situation that we find ourselves in but with a surprising twist that only God can provide. We are like Black Bart and his gang of horse thieves. While we may consider ourselves to be fine, upstanding citizens who are not guilty of breaking any laws or committing any heinous crimes, we are even more guilty and more deserving of punishment than Black Bart. We stand condemned, not before a fallible judge and criminal law, but before a holy and righteous God and His perfect law which condemns not only criminal actions, but every thought, word, or deed that violates God's will.

There is a price on your head. The payment for sin is death. It's not "dead or alive", but just dead. There is no exception to that rule, nor avoiding that consequence. There is a reward here, too. It is not a monetary reward, but something far more valuable than that.

Yet, there are a few twists to all of this. We are wanted by God, but not in the way that criminals were "wanted" in the old west and for which their likenesses were put on wanted posters. Black Bart and the like were wanted because they were bad. They had transgressed the laws of society and were wanted so that their deeds could be punished and their debt to society could be paid.

God, on the other hand, wants you, not *because* you are bad, but despite the fact that you are bad. As proud as you might be of yourself, your moral life, your piety, or your accomplishments, there is not a single thing in you that would be attractive to a holy and righteous God or rescue you from the death sentence you deserve. God wants you because He loves you dearly. And He loves you dearly because that is His nature to be loving. You are "wanted", not to be punished, but to be saved from punishment.

Therefore, the price on your head He places on another head -- the innocent head of Jesus Christ, His only Son. He assumes your sin and guilt and pays the full price for it. As Isaiah, the prophet, foretold it: "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him." (Is. 53:4-5)

Jesus took the sin which earned the death sentence for each of you upon Himself and paid the full price by enduring the death sentence on the cross in your place. By doing this, He has brought you to justice, so to speak, just as when any citizen would bring in someone like Black Bart to the marshal in the old west. However, instead of being brought in to face punishment, you are welcomed home by a loving Heavenly Father. You are reconciled with God, the one whom you have offended and are at peace with Him.

Now comes the reward. In the wild west, when the criminal is brought in, the one who brings the criminal in gets the full reward. The same here is true. After paying the price, Jesus is raised from the dead to new life, never to die again, as His reward and vindication. Now here comes another twist from God. Anyone who received a reward for bringing a criminal to justice in the old west would keep the reward for himself. Should he choose to share it, the last person he would share it with would be the criminal. Yet that's exactly what Jesus does. He gives the reward away to the offenders.

In our text for today from the book of Revelation, Jesus says, "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense ("reward" in other translations) with me, to repay everyone for what he has done." The word used

for *reward* here is used throughout Scriptures for payment made for services rendered. It doesn't refer to any service that you or I have done to earn God's favor by our moral lives or our personal piety. Jesus calls it "my" reward. It is the eternal life *He* has earned by His suffering at the hands of sinners, His enduring of hell itself, and His death on the cross.

Yet His reward is not something that benefits Him alone. At the end of this month, we celebrate Memorial Day. We honor those who have died in the service of our country. We do that because the sacrifice of their lives has benefited us. They have given their lives and preserved our freedoms in America. In an even greater degree, Jesus' death on the cross benefits us. His resurrection from the dead gives life - first, to Him - and then to all whom He shall give it.

He will give it "to everyone for what he has done." Does that mean we somehow earn life by our good works? By no means! It is *His* reward earned by Him, not us. It is given by Him, not earned by us. As Scripture says, "by grace you have been saved, through faith --and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast." (Eph. 2:8-9) What each of us has done -- the totality of our lives -- will have given public evidence of what is privately in our hearts, either faith or unbelief. Those who have faith in the Lamb, Jesus Christ, will have shown that faith in how they lived their lives. The will have their robes washed in His blood, will be given the right to the tree of life, and will be given the right to enter into the New Jerusalem to live there forever.

This brings our celebration of the festival half of the church year -- from Advent to Easter -- to a complete circle. We began by looking forward to Jesus coming in Advent. We celebrated His coming in His birth at Bethlehem at Christmas. We rejoiced in His revelation to the Gentiles (including us) in Epiphany. We followed His suffering during the time of Lent. We celebrated His resurrection and return to power and glory in Easter and on Ascension Day. Everything has been completed. The guilty are wanted, not dead, but alive -- for reward, not punishment. The Innocent One is punished for the guilty and receives the reward of resurrection of life which He then promises to share with the guilty who have been declared to be righteous in His eyes through faith. We continue our lives here awaiting Jesus to return and give that reward.

What eager anticipation is ours as we wait! The promise of Jesus here rouses in all Christians the desire, never long dormant, for His Return. The text says, "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come!'" The Holy Spirit prompts the bride of Christ - the church - to cry out, 'Come'. "And let the one who hears say, "Come!" Everyone who hears this message and believes is motivated to cry out for Jesus to come and give the promised reward. "And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price." "The one thirsting for life need not wait until the coming is completed, he is constantly himself to be coming to the Word..and his soul shall drink." (Lenski, p.670) Through the preaching and comfort of God's Word, we are sustained in our faith during our pilgrimage through this world of evil and death and are motivated to cry out, "Come!"

Jesus' final word to the church is in the final words of our text and it is a promise to His church, God's saints on earth: "He who testifies to these things says, Surely, I am coming soon." This is the same Jesus who has promised to be with us until the end of the age. This is the same Jesus who has gone to prepare a place for us and then said, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am." This is the same Jesus who died to defeat death and rose to receive the reward of life and to share it with all of those who faithfully wait His coming. Thus, the prayer of every Christian individually, and of all Christians collectively for all time is, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." Come now! Come and free us from the effects of sin and evil! Come and give us the reward You have won and promised to us! Come and give us life in the presence of the Father for all eternity.

This is something exciting to contemplate and joyful to hope for as we live in a world of evil, sorrow, and disappointments. Yet it is easy to forget about at times. At the congregation I served in Nebraska, we had a very vivid reminder of this promise. Every time we came into the church we were reminded of that promise. It was a large painting of Jesus, smiling and arms extended, at the back of the church with a caption in German. Few could understand what the caption said because the language barrier. So, I once took time to translate it. The caption was from our text for this morning and said, "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me." Knowing that translation meant we could always remember Jesus' promise when we entered the church for Divine Service and when we left the church after Divine Service. And that promise is this: He is coming soon to give you His reward: eternal life in the presence of God and of all His saints past, present, and future. May that promise fill you with joy and hope during the bad times. May that promise sustain you and encourage throughout your entire life as we, with all of God's people, continually cry out, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."