

August 29, 2010
Pentecost 14

"Stay with Jesus on Mount Zion"

HEBREWS 12:18-24

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; ¹⁹ to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, ²⁰ because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." ²¹ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." ²² But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, ²³ to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

This past week I heard a report on the radio about a new book on life after death. An oncologist offers anecdotal evidence that there is life after death from the near death experiences people describe to him. The radio announcer said such a book could be used to motivate people to live better lives as they think about what will happen to them after they die. Za Za Gabor is near death. Some years ago an interviewer asked her why she was generous with her money. Without blinking her elongated eyelashes, she said, "Of course you know that they more rent you pay now, the bigger mansion you will have after you die." Every human being is hard wired from birth to believe that the good things we do in this life will provide a better place for us after we die.

Jesus once warned his disciples that they should watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees. The Pharisees taught that if you kept the Old Testament laws and followed the traditions of the Jewish people you could have eternal life. The Jewish people today believe that making amends with someone on the day of atonement will actually earn God's favor and forgiveness for your sins. A man once told me that he grew up very religious in the Roman Catholic Church confessing his sins every week to the priest. The priest would tell him his sins were forgiven, but then always added some requirement to the forgiveness. This man tried so hard to add his own efforts at being good to what Jesus had done for him, and always came up short. In frustration he stopped going to church because he could not find the peace he wanted with his God.

The book of Hebrews was written to help Jewish Christians fight against the forces of evil that were trying to pull them back to believing it was not good enough to have Jesus sacrifice at the cross to pay for all of their sin. They were being told they needed to add something to what Jesus had done. As we said in a sermon recently, Jesus plus anything equals nothing. Jesus plus nothing equals everything. I can take some vitamins such as this to supplement my diet, but any attempt to supplement what Jesus has done will ultimately supplant or destroy what Jesus has done.

In the words just read to you, Hebrew Christians are told to stay away from trying to save themselves by living their lives at Mount Sinai where God gave them the Law. They are encouraged to stay with the perfect sacrifice Jesus made for them pictured for us by what happened on Mount Zion.

It is scary to go back to trusting in the law

It is a scary thing to go back to trusting in the law as the source of my salvation, even a small part of the law. We are told, "You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them." When the Lord God gave his law on Mount Sinai there was lots of black smoke and fire and wind and an earthquake and the loud blast of the trumpet. They heard the voice of God speaking to them and it scarred the people. If an animal so much as touched the mountain it would be destroyed. Even mighty Moses, God's prophet, said that he was so terrified by the sight that he was trembling with fear. God was right there at Mount Sinai with all of his majesty and glory as God. These people were afraid because their lives were in danger. They were afraid because they knew they could never measure up to what God was expecting of them as his people.

Have you ever been afraid of dying? The car in which you were driving spins out of control, and suddenly the terrifying thought grips you, "I might be dying." There is an earthquake, and you rush for the doorway to protect yourself from the roof or ceiling falling down on you. The report from the doctor is not good. How long do I have to live? When you have a near death experience, God is right there in your face. You are split seconds away from standing in his presence and standing before him in the judgment. Death always has a sting to it. 1 Corinthians 15 says, "The sting of death is sin and the strength of sin is the law." God's law tells us that if we drink from the deadly poison of sin we will die, not just physically but spiritually and eternally in hell. You know the verse that says, "The wages of sin is death" and another verse that says, "The soul that sins will die." In Romans 1 we are told, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

This mighty God who appeared to these people at Mount Sinai and gave them his law, also showed gave them religious practices that would picture his plan for saving them. Read the book of Leviticus. These people were told to offer animals as sacrifices, not to earn God's favor but to picture the future blood of Jesus that would be shed to pay for every single sin they had committed. In this book of Hebrews the Jewish Christians were reminded that Jesus is the ultimate high priest, the Lamb of God, who gave his life for us. We heard these strong encouraging words in the sermon last Sunday, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Jesus sat down at the right hand of God after he finished his work of saving us, because his work was complete and finished.

Do you remember how God's Old Testament people handled their fears when Moses went up into the mountain to be with the Lord? They gathered together their gold and made a golden calf which they worshipped in place of the Lord. They wanted to worship God on their own terms, with their own ideas, and their own works. One of our members gave

me a bulletin from a church they visited in the South. At first I was amused at the sermon theme the pastor chose for the lesson on the golden calf: "The Golden Calf, an Attempt to Beef Up Religion." But then it struck me that this is a problem we all face in life on a daily basis. Satan will always tempt us to add something to what Jesus has done to make it better, to beef it up to make it more real, more complete. Jesus plus anything adds up to nothing. Jesus plus nothing adds up to everything.

It is a joy to stay with Jesus on Mount Zion

Instead of going back to the law at Mount Sinai to try and save ourselves, we need to stay with Jesus on Mount Zion. Let's listen to these amazing words that clarify for us where we stand with the Lord whether facing death or the challenges of life this week. "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands and thousands of angels in joyful assembly, the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of the righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

Please, dear Christian, notice that it says, "You have come." It does not say, "You might come" or "You will come." You have come to Mount Zion and all that it symbolizes. Think of all the animals that shed their blood on the Temple Mount over all the years. You have seen these sacrifices and you know that the blood of animals pictured the blood of Jesus that was shed for you. Week after week we stand together in this congregation assuring each other that something done in the past for us provides us with complete pardon for every sin of this past week. Because we have come to Mount Zion we can assure each other boldly and confidently, "The blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from all sin." We can even be so bold as to tell each other, "What part of all don't you understand?"

We have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. We are the Holy Christian church, the communion of saints. "From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride, and with his blood he bought her and for her life he died."

We have come to thousands and thousands of angels in joyful assembly. Jesus said there is joy among the angels of heaven over one sinner that repents. When we gather to sing about being saved through Jesus instead of our works and efforts, hundreds, and even thousands of angels are rejoicing with us. Here is the church. Here is the steeple, open up and see all the people. We see the people around us worshipping with us, but we don't see the angels singing their joyful praises because we are building our lives on Jesus and not ourselves.

We have come to the church of the first born. The first born son gets the lion's share of the inheritance. We are all first born sons in God's kingdom. We are coheirs with Christ in glory. Jesus prayed for us the night before he died. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am and see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the world began."

You have come to God, the judge of all men made perfect, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." Once again, notice the past tense. It does not say "you will come," but "you have come." When Jesus died he cried out "It is finished." When Jesus rose from the dead he was raised for your justification as we are told in Romans 4:25. If the heavens opened up and Jesus came in clouds of glory at this moment in time, we would gladly welcome him as our

judge, and our Father as our judge, because Jesus already earned for us the verdict of not guilty. We are one with all these people who died in the arms of Jesus. The joy they share in the presence of the Lord is a joy we share. The blood that Abel shed cried out for vengeance on his evil brother Cain. The blood that Jesus shed for my sins cries out for pardon and peace and forgiveness. As we sing in the hymn, "Abel's blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies, But the blood of Jesus for our pardon cries."

Everything around me, and everything inside of me, cries out and says: "It is not enough to have Jesus. You need to add something to what he has done to be sure of your salvation." Stay with Jesus on Mount Zion. Stay with the sacrifice he has made for you. Jesus plus anything means nothing. Jesus plus nothing means everything. Amen.