

A Kingdom That Cannot Be Shaken

Hebrews 12:18-13:6

So the author to the Hebrews closes his long treatise by describing our journey through life as a pilgrimage involving two mountains. First, there was scary and difficult Mt. Sinai in the wilderness where Moses climbed up into wind and cloud and lightning and shadow to see and hear from God just how bent and broken and wrong we all are when measured by the uncompromising holiness and justice of God. So Moses came down the mountain burdened by a world of commandments and rituals and disciplines all meant to teach us that reaching God will be no simple, easy business.

But also carved into the stones Moses carried down Sinai were hints and foreshadowings that one day God would lead us to a different kind of mountain, Mt. Zion in the Promised Land, which in the centuries after Moses would become, like Sinai, another symbolic place. Zion was the mountain where God would forgive and heal what is bent and broken and sinful in the hearts and lives of men and women like you and me. And it was there on the slopes of old Mt. Zion in Palestine that Jesus shed blood.

He died there for our sins and was buried there in a garden tomb as if to hint that with his death and resurrection and ascension, a new Zion would open in heaven, where our bentness and brokenness and wrongness could be forgiven and healed and made whole and right forever. And so the promise here in Hebrews is that every person who's given his life to Jesus is forgiven here and now and set on a path that finally, inevitably leads to that new Zion in heaven, a place that one day will descend to earth and make this world the sanctuary Garden it was always meant to be.

And we heard Jesus promise as much last week from Matthew's gospel, he said, "*Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden...*" Tired of carrying the commandments? Tired of feeling frustrated and hopeless and ashamed? "*Come to me,*" Jesus said, "*...and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you,*" (in other words become my slave, Jesus said), "*and learn from me for I am gentle and humble at heart and you will find rest for your souls.*"

The point being that the way past the clouds and shadows and lightning and thunder, all that holiness and judgment that threatened us at Sinai, the way past it, is for us to trust Jesus to forgive what is bent and broken and wrong ...and then to take his yoke, to become his slave, let him to lead us down a path in life that will get us to Zion. Which is why our passage this morning goes on by warning us to listen to the Savior we trusted: "*See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused Moses who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we turn away from Christ who warns us from heaven.*"

You see the danger here is not that we won't make the grade, not that we won't get it right. With Christ in play, we can be forgiven for that. The danger is that we won't let Christ be Christ, that

we'll imagine that because he's "*gentle and humble at heart*" that he's easy, that he's something less than the only Person who can get us past being bent and broken and wrong and safely home to God and the Garden.

Because if we "*turn away from Christ*" our passage warns us, we'll find ourselves right back at Sinai, in the wind and storm, facing a holy and uncompromising Judge unprotected by that one Companion who can get us past the firestorm and safely into the party. Because the only way any of us gets into heaven is to point to Christ and say to the Father, "I'm with him!" which won't work if in fact what we've done in this world is "*turn away from Christ*" and lived the way we please. To be with Christ on Judgment Day, we have to be with him here and now.

And so our passage goes on to warn us that all the sound and fury of Sinai was nothing compared to what lies in wait for us on Judgment Day. "*God has promised,*" our passage tells us, '*Just once more, I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens.*' " The point being that Sinai was an earthly event. It was terrifying to the Israelites who were there, but it was local, once you got ten miles from the mountain, you might not even know anything was going on. But Judgment Day, Jesus taught us is different, "*As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man...*". In other words, the Last Day will be a total, uncompromising, horizon to horizon judgment.

The passage quoted here is from Haggai the prophet, who likely wrote these words on old Mt. Zion some 500 years before Christ at the very moment that Israel was rebuilding old Zion as a sanctuary city where men and women could find forgiveness and help from God back there and then. They'd just returned from exile in Babylon and they didn't have much to work with. So they patched together this little cottage temple that was so forlorn that it made some of them want to weep.

But in so many words, Haggai the prophet said to them, "Nothing to weep about here!" "*Yet once more,*" God told them, "*...I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land...and I will fill this house with glory.*" And as Haggai's prophecy winds on it centers on a man there named Zerubbabel, a man who was descended from David and who became an ancestor of Christ. And so Haggai points out Zerubbabel in the crowd and he announces to the people that, when Judgment Day comes, all that will matter is if you were with Zerubbabel. Strange, almost crazy, because Zerubbabel lived and died 500 years before Christ, way before any Judgment Day.

But the point Haggai was making is that forgiveness and help from God doesn't come to us based on the beauty of the sanctuary or the quality of the ritual or the performance of anyone there. Forgiveness and help from God comes based on whether we know and love the Savior God sent to lead us to Zion. In those days, back there and then, it was Zerubbabel, the Davidic prince who led the people in the rebuilding of the sanctuary.

In the Last Days, here and now, it's Christ who is leading us to heavenly Zion, molding us together into that invisible, indestructible sanctuary that will still be standing after the whole world has been shaken to bits and gone up in flames. We need to be with Christ, our passage is teaching us. It goes on to say, "*Let us own grace since we have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken and so let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.*"

In other words, the fact that Jesus is "*gentle and humble at heart*", that he wants to heal what's bent and broken inside us and lead us to the place of safety and healing and goodness he's prepared for us, none of those facts preclude the additional fact that Jesus is as holy and uncompromising as his Father. The grace and forgiveness he provides us are meant to set us on a path toward holiness, toward becoming like him. And the place we begin to understand grace and reach for holiness is worship, our passage tells us.

It's at Sunday worship that we learn to love a holy God and start to become what he wants us to be. And a degree of awe and fear should be part of the picture. Because part and parcel with being forgiven and living by grace is facing our sins and taking to heart how totally each of us is at God's mercy. In his hymn, "Amazing Grace" the old slave trader, John Newton put it this way, "T'was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." Because who can atone, who can make up for putting human beings in the hold of a slave ship and watching half of them die before you bring the rest of them to market. What could he appeal for but simple, total grace?

What the Bible says about each of us is that all of us need God's grace. We've all been cruel. We've all caused pain. We've all seen pain, seen need and done nothing and not cared. I could go on and eventually name something you've done. But the point is that to trust Christ is to find love, to bind ourselves to someone who will love us through the bentness and brokenness and wrongness that should make us afraid if we allowed ourselves to take it to heart. So we head for Zion, for heaven, led and taught by Christ and from him we learn the ethics of that indestructible kingdom that Jesus allowed us to join.

Our passage give us a sampler of kingdom ethics that I will quickly work through. "*Let brotherly love continue on.*" our author tells us. To belong to Christ is to take everybody here in church as family and to love them through the rough patches that every family has to face. The verb "*continue*" here means to "*abide*", to stay at it with each other all the way to Zion if we possibly can, to resolve what can humanly be resolved and to forbear those wrongs and injuries that can't be humanly untangled. To offer love and forgiveness particularly when our brothers and sisters are unlovable and hard to forgive.

"*Don't neglect hospitality to strangers, for some thereby have entertained angels unawares.*" It is a fun idea that God dresses angels as street people and sends them to church just to see what happens. It might be what they watch for comedy in heaven! Seriously, this is a kingdom that God has opened to all sorts of people from everywhere. Different cultures and languages and

backgrounds and outlooks. Different emotional and spiritual wiring, people with real problems, people who seem strange and foreign. But we dare not exclude from our hearts and lives people God has declared welcome.

“Remember those who are in prison as though you were there with them, and those who are mistreated because you are in the body.” Christians have had to go to prison for their faith in every century since Christ was taken into custody. It is a fact we need to remember in our prayers and our giving. I’ve also known a number of Christians to wind up in prison because some sin or bondage led them afoul of the law. To own grace is to show grace to people who need grace and prison is a good place to start. We too are *“in the body”* our passage teaches, we are spiritually linked to other believers even when they’re in trouble, especially when they’re in trouble.

“Let marriage be honored among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers.” The Scriptures go on and on about marriage, God is zealous to define and guard marriage because the bed where husband and wife get woven together and make children and become father and mother, that bed is the well spring from which all wholesome human affection arises.

God has designed love to be learned in an environment where sacred promises keep everybody close and in the game through good times and bad. All of us need and count on love, especially children in families and so to make love and romance and affection casual and informal and temporary is to court a sort of danger and injury from which God wants to protect us. His zeal for the marriage covenant and his hatred for any-thing that undermines family is rooted in his love for the men and women and children who all go at risk when family falls apart when these promises are broken or never even made.

Finally our passage teaches, *“Let your way of life be free from the love of money. Let what you have suffice. For God has said, ‘I will never leave or forsake you.’* How we handle money says something about what we think of God. Because grace is not just about what is touchy feely, psychological and spiritual. To be forgiven, to become whole, we place our broken and needy hearts in the care of a Savior who promised to meet all our needs. So we can afford to give and share, to sacrifice and serve to the extent we know that Christ is real and on our side, and able to meet all our needs.