

The Journey Home

Isaiah 35; Hebrews 12:11-24

After just about a year's journey through the New Testament book of Hebrews, I can finally tell you that we have rounded the last bend and we are working our way through the home stretch of this long, involved letter written some thirty or so years after Pentecost to what I imagine was the second generation of Christian disciples. So the first generation apostles who had roamed in Galilee and Judea with Jesus, most of them, had likely passed from the scene by now.

And Old Testament Israel was circling the drain. Remember that, in Matthew 24, Jesus had put Old Jerusalem on a one generation clock which meant that the old priests and the old sacrifices and the old temple were all by now just a few ticks away from disappearing off the stage of history, not to be seen ever again as the visible, tangible brick and mortar and flesh and blood reality they were during all the centuries between Moses and Christ.

So ... what was going on that prompted the writing of this great, long letter? Well, the growing tension between the Romans and everything kosher and Jewish, the looming threat to all the beautiful symbols and rituals and architecture had propelled an army of mystic rabbi's out of Israel and into the Mediterranean world to rally God's people one more time into a frenzy of popular Jewish piety, kosher calendar and food, kosher rituals and worship, all practiced as if the life, death and resurrection of Jesus hadn't changed anything.

So these mystic rabbi's taught devout people, Jews and Christians alike, to pray more, read more, give more, to observe the Law with such intensity and commitment as to wrestle God down from the clouds to rescue old Israel one more time. And, to their mind, everything depended on the accomplishment and mastery of their disciples. The rabbi's demanded great feats of piety and they promised that would God reward them with a power and prosperity and clairvoyance that would make them superior to their more ordinary neighbors.

Now, in his letters to the Galatians and the Colossians, Paul had warned the church for twenty years against the sort of self involved, self exalting, technique oriented piety the mystic rabbi's promoted. But now Paul was likely gone, and so the author to the Hebrews warns the disciples again that our mastery of any sort of spiritual regime does not obligate God to do a thing for us. No combination of kosher ritual and personal discipline will make us any the more worthy of any sort of blessing from God.

It is, he tells us this morning, a journey to the wrong mountain. Listen to him, he writes to us as Christians, "*You have not come to [Mt. Sinai,] a mountain that can be touched, to blazing fire and darkness and shadow and storm, to the sound of a trumpet and to a voice whose words were such that those who heard them begged that no further word be given.*" The point being that Sinai was the place where God's relentless holiness was revealed to his people...in a way that

terrified and overwhelmed them. The word “holy” means “set apart, belonging to God, utterly different from fallen human experience”.

And Sinai is a necessary stop on the road to heaven. None of us will save our souls without first confronting and taking to heart the fact that God is so pure and so great and so wise and so powerful that none of us can safely stand before him. We need to fear him because we are not pure, not good, not great, not wise, not powerful even if we have managed some regime that some mystic sold us. So Sinai is that necessary place where God’s brilliance and purity are contrasted with how bent and broken and sinful we are. It is a necessary stop but our passage teaches that it is no destination for a Christian in the Last Days. You don’t want Sinai to be your last stop on a journey toward God.

So our author guides us to someplace better than Sinai. He writes to us as Christians, “*But you have come to Mt. Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to ten thousand angels in festal gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, to God who is judge of all, to the spirits of righteous men and women made perfect and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...*”

So why is Zion better as a destination than Sinai? Sinai is the place where God’s holiness is expressed and our repentance is demanded. The commandments Moses brought down the mountain make unmistakably clear in exhaustive detail how far we are from God’s goodness in our fallen condition. And we need to take to heart that God is no less pure, no less demanding and uncompromising than he was on the day Moses climbed Mt. Sinai.

But we need to move on from there to Zion, because Mt. Zion is the place where sin is atoned for and forgiveness is on offer. It is, our passage tells us, “*the city of the living God*”. In other words, Zion is home. We came from a garden where we once lived at peace with God and Zion is the place where we will live with God again.

Zion is “*the heavenly Jerusalem*”. Not any place here on earth. Not physical Jerusalem in modern Palestine. That school of interpretation that makes the modern state of Israel the center of biblical prophecy is simply mistaken in my opinion. The clearest prophecies about Christ’s return speak of a sanctuary descending from heaven, and, strangely, we’re told that we, the Christian Church, are the sanctuary. In other words, the love and adoration we will offer Jesus at his return will mark us as his sanctuary, that eternal place of worship where we will love and adore him forever.

So in the prophecies, the descending heavenly Sanctuary and the Bride of Christ are the same thing. Which is why the prophecies speak of Christ’s return as the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. Which is why our passage here in Hebrews speaks of “*ten thousand angels in festal gathering*”. At last their armor can come off and their flaming swords can be stored away and the angels will wear their party clothes.

It is at Zion that we together will be *“the assembly of the firstborn, enrolled in heaven”*. Again the prophecies, Old Testament and New, frequently speak of a book in which the names of God’s chosen people are *“enrolled”*. Of course, *“the firstborn”* is Jesus himself, *“the mediator of the new covenant”* our text describes him. But the most important feature of heavenly Zion, the last feature mentioned is *“the sprinkling of blood which speaks a better word than the blood of Abel”*.

Our author remembers the death of Abel as that moment early in our history when men and women began to understand the level of grief and absurdity the fall had introduced into our relationships and experience. A man murdered by his brother in a moment of insane jealousy and paranoia. The first shedding of human blood.

The point of the comparison between Jesus and Abel is that Abel’s death was so tragic that nothing could atone for the anguish and grief sin set in motion except Jesus, God’s own Son, absorbing on the cross the judgment we deserve for all the grief and injury and anguish we inflict on each another beginning with the tears Adam and Eve shed at what became of their sons. So at long last, on Mt. Zion, Jesus’ blood will speak *“a better word”* for us and about us than all the sadness which went before him. And when we reach Zion, Jesus will wipe our tears and say something like the what high priests said on the Day of Atonement, *“All is well. All is forgiven and all can rest.”*

Jesus put it this way in Matthew’s gospel, he said, *“Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble at heart and you shall find rest for your souls.”* It’s a better word than the mystic rabbi’s who were stuck at Sinai, *“Pray more. Read more. Give more. Do more.”* It’s a personal word. *“Come to me,”* Jesus said, *“...and I will give you rest.”*

In other words, once we’ve trusted Christ, once we’ve given our lives to him we don’t have to wrestle God down from anywhere, we don’t have to impress him with our technique. We can be who we are, get forgiven when we need that and trust to him lead us on a journey that ends in heavenly Zion. *“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,”* Jesus said, *“for I am gentle and humble at heart and you shall find rest for your souls.”*

So, far from our having to master a regime, Jesus gently, kindly and occasionally sternly teaches us here and now the values and principles that will make us feel at home once we’ve reached Zion. And here in Hebrews our author begins to outline the journey, he says, *“...strengthen your weak hands and the knees that are feeble, make straight paths for your feet so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed.”* he writes.

The point being that we begin this journey injured by sin. We are all broken and bent spiritually and God calls us to navigate through life in a way that our weaknesses aren’t aggravated. So Jesus will lead and guide us but we still have to know ourselves and navigate accordingly.

He goes on, *“Pursue peace with everyone and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”* That verb *“pursue”* does not speak of anything passive. It implies that real peace, Zion’s peace, is far from easy for us to reach and hold in our relationships here and now. It comes so much more naturally for us to feel our injuries and hold our grudges and to drift into becoming strangers and enemies even in church. But the gospel teaches us to see things from the other guy’s point of view, to let people up for air when they’ve put a foot wrong, to forbear our wants and needs and even our rights so that we stay together on the journey.

And, like peace, *“holiness”* must be pursued because it also is not natural or easy for any of us to reach. I’ve already said that holiness is not so much the exaggerated religiosity that most of us imagine when we hear the word. Holiness is what happens to us inside when we make time and space to talk to God in prayer and listen to him in our Bibles.

So holiness is more a matter of personal influence than technique. God is different from us and he influences us mostly in those times we set apart to be with him, individually and together. My mother used to be able tell which friends I had played with by how I talked and acted when I got home that night. Holiness works like that. Be with God and we become like God. Get busy with an impersonal religion and not much genuine happens.

“See to it,” our passage warns us, *“that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no ‘root of bitterness’ rises up and by it many become defiled.”* Real grace, gospel grace, is both absolutely free and extremely costly, absolutely unconditional and extremely demanding. God needs nothing from us in the way of accomplishment and mastery. He will take us as we are, sins and dents, cracks and stains. And he’ll forgive us as we go along.

But he wants us in our entirety, not to conduct a half-hearted religious exercise, but to love him and seek him and to serve him as Christ loved and sought and served the Father for our sake. And we all know that love demands more than any regime or or technique can evoke from us. To attain grace, to really own it, is to love the One who showed us grace and we need to know that love for the Father will lead us places and change us in ways that no religion would ever dare to demand of us.

The *“root of bitterness”* our passage warns us against is a turn of phrase that appears three times in holy Scripture, first by Moses in Deuteronomy 29, then by the Apostle Peter in Acts 8 and finally here in Hebrews 12. Moses warned God’s people against that soul who was outwardly orthodox, correct in doctrine, but who inwardly gave himself permission to live as he pleased. The man says to himself, *“I shall be safe though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.”*

In the New Testament, Peter applied a similar turn of phrase to Simon Magus, a mystic rabbi who in Acts, chapter 8, sought to sell himself to the Samaritans as the end all and be all of everything spiritual. And I think this root of bitterness is about leadership, what happens to us when our ministries in God’s kingdom become about ourselves, when leaders and teachers

redefine what God says to fit a human agenda or regime. So we stop being servants and imagine ourselves rulers, we get all wrapped up in where we stand and how we look and who is with us and who is not. And our teaching and our relationships become bitter and fouled. Don't go there, our passage warns us.

Finally, we're warned not to be "*sexually immoral or unholy like Esau who traded away his birthright for a single meal*". There are warnings against sexual immorality interwoven all through Old Testament Law and New Testament gospel teaching. For two reasons, first because we were made so that sexuality and spirituality are interwoven in our very nature. What Jesus identified as the most important commandment prescribes no action at all. It's about who we love. "*You shall love the Lord your God, heart, soul, mind and strength.*"

Who we love and how we love is what defines us as persons. And what God commands of us is that when we give ourselves to love someone, we commit ourselves to stay with them, to focus on them for as much and as long as the covenant God gave for the relationship requires. Now sometimes marriage covenants and family covenants and church covenants break and sometimes we can't stop it and it's always heart-rending when it happens. But we're commanded to attempt and make and keep covenants nevertheless because loyal, faithful, focused love will be the coin of the realm in heavenly Zion.

And the second reason these warnings are all over the Bible is that most people, back when Hebrews was written and again now today, most people have little concept that God has organized life to unfold based on love relationships that we can count on because the love that defines and nurtures us is grounded in the covenants we've made with God and with each other. So to sleep with someone without a covenant because we're lonely or need comfort, or for any other reason is to defy God's whole design for how love is to be given and shared and cherished.

For months now we've been treated in the media to a daily parade of people's reputations being lost and their lives destroyed because they imagined that heart to heart, body to body connections between people were less important and could be treated with less care and formality than what God commanded, starting in the Garden of Eden. But the gospel teaches love needs covenant, that love is only safe when it is defined and bound by the covenant God ordained for it. So we can't make believe in the church that the fences God set up to protect marriage and family and church can be safely ignored.

Which leads us to Esau, Isaac's elder son, who could have been the father of the faithful, but he threw the honor away 'cause he got lost in the moment and wanted what he wanted and didn't care what God had give him. Later he would weep when it sank in what he had lost by treating something sacred as cheap. It was unholy, so unlike God to be loved and chosen and to throw it away because he forget its worth. The worship services we offer here, the ministries we shared are sacred and need to be treated with the care and respect that the sacred deserves, not carelessly and half heartedly.

For me, it brings Joni Mitchell to mind. Do you rememebr what she sang? “You know, it always seems to go that you don’t know what you got till it’s gone.”