

Sermon Text: Hebrews 12:18-24 ¹⁸For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. ²⁰(For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow." ²¹And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.") ²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, ²³to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, ²⁴to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. (NKJV)

Sermon Theme: Which Mountain Shall We Go To?

- 1. Mt. Sinai with its demands and threats of the law or**
- 2. Mt. Zion wherein is saving grace and eternal glory**

In the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has brought us to a glorious mountain, dear fellow redeemed;

Across the face of our planet earth there are many mountain ranges of varying heights and expanses. As citizens of this beautiful country, we don't have to travel overseas to see mountains. In South Dakota, there is Mt. Rushmore. Further to the west are the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, the Glaciers in Montana, the Tetons in Wyoming, and the Sierras in our state of California.

To gaze upon such mountains either at a distance or up close is quite an awesome experience. These massive land formations are so majestic and beautiful. While the sight of mountains can be truly glorious to behold, yet they can also be terrifying. Just ask mountain climbers who survived an avalanche or a fall from great heights or a volcanic eruption.

In today's Scripture text, the Christian reader is faced with a choice between two mountains. The choice is either to remain with a mountain that is truly grand and glorious in every way or to go back to a mountain that is terrifying and deadly. The two mountains are Mt. Zion wherein is God's saving grace and heavenly glory or Mt. Sinai with its extensive demands and dreadful threats of the law.

The Christians to whom the book of Hebrews was originally addressed were Jewish Christians. They had been facing very difficult and trying times on account of their newfound faith. Jews of Judaism were persecuting them, because they became Christian, embracing Jesus as their Lord and Savior. With Jewish Christians experiencing such hard times, they were tempted to revert back to Judaism and all its many Old Testament laws in order to escape religious persecution.

This is not unlike what current day Christians are faced with in different quarters of the world, as followers of various law-oriented religions persecute believers in Christ in order to get us to forsake Christ and embrace their religion.

For the Hebrew Christians to forsake Christianity and go back to Judaism meant relying upon a religion where people put trust in their own efforts to pay their sin-debt to God, win God's favor and merit heaven. This kind of works-oriented belief can be said of all the nonchristian religions in the world today, whether it is Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Pantheism, Jehovah Witness, Mormonism or whatever.

Work-righteous religions can be quite appealing, as our human nature has the tendency of thinking we can somehow atone for our sins and gain entrance into heaven. How many times haven't we heard it said of a person who just died, "Surely the departed one must be in heaven, because he or she was such a good person." There are those ignorant of the Gospel who could say the same about Tari Bliss who passed away this past Wednesday.

But the Word of God warned the Hebrew Christians to not go back to the religion they left behind. Listen once again to the ominous warning in our text, "For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. (For they could not endure what was commanded: 'And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.' And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.')

These graphically descriptive words are referring to Mt. Sinai back in the day when God handed down many laws through Moses for the children of Israel. The thundering voice from heaven, the thick dark clouds, the thunder and lightning, the fire and smoke, and the loud blast of a trumpet caused the Jews to tremble and quake with fear. Since they couldn't come near the mountain and touch it lest they die, the Jews pleaded with Moses to go up the mountain on their behalf.

Why all these frightening sights and sounds at Mt. Sinai? It was visual and audible evidence of the presence of the holy God who hates sin and whose divine justice must punish sinfulness. God came to Mt. Sinai in order to hand down His commandments which expose mankind's sin and threaten to punish all those who transgress God's holy laws. These laws were never intended to provide a way for sinners to save themselves, but rather to reveal the need for a Savior.

Knowing this about God's law, how can anyone entertain the illusion that we can appease God's righteous wrath and remove the sin that separates us from God and from heaven. There is no hope to be found at Mt. Sinai in gaining access to God and to heaven through works of the law.

And so, the warning from God's Word is 'don't go there'. Don't put your trust in any good deed you do in order to make things right with God and merit heaven. It just isn't going to do it for you. In Romans, Paul warns about the futility of relying upon our works and deeds to be forgiven and saved, saying, "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin." (3:19,20)

Instead of going back to Mt. Sinai and a Judaic religion of the law, the Christian reader is exhorted in our text to remain at Mt. Zion where God's saving grace is found and the promise of

eternal glory in heaven is assured. In striking contrast to Mt. Sinai, Mt. Zion is truly glorious in every way. Listen once again to what our text says of it in verses 22-24, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.”

In catechism class when studying the Third Article and what the Bible says about the Holy Christian Church, that is, the Church of believers, we find these verses just read from Hebrews. As we consider these verses, I have asked students to go through them and underline each term and expression that is speaking of believers in Christ Jesus. If you would please, take your bulletin and read over these verses for yourselves and identify the words referring to you and me and every Christian. There are some terms you know are not referring to us, such as an ‘innumerable company of angels’ and ‘God the Judge of all’ and ‘Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant’ and ‘the blood of sprinkling’. And then there are other terms you may not immediately recognize as referring to us.

Let’s take a closer look at all the words and terms we could underline as speaking of us as believers in Christ, and consider what they mean to us. First off, there is ‘Mount Zion’. The physical mountain called Zion was the highest point in the area where the city of Jerusalem was built. Mount Zion in a figurative sense is a symbolic picture of the triumphant Church of believers. Through faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior we have gained the victory over sin, death, and the devil. Founded upon Jesus’ redemptive work and His gracious teachings like a mountain we stand firm, immovable, and unshakeable no matter what kind of trouble or storm of life beats against us.

The next terms to underline for us are “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” Through faith in Jesus we have become the city of the living God. The Lord lives and dwells among us and in us, blessing us with spiritual peace in the knowledge of His forgiveness, His acceptance, and His favor. He also reigns in our hearts and minds, instilling love in us to walk in the ways of His commands.

This city of God of which we are a part as believers in Christ is not earthly or temporal in nature. We are a part of the heavenly Jerusalem. We are destined to have a share in a heavenly world that is eternal.

Going on in our text, we are described as “the general assembly and church of the firstborn”. In Old Testament times, the firstborn son had a great advantage over all the other children in the family. It was to the firstborn that a double portion of the family inheritance was given. When we were adopted into God’s family at our baptism, we all were given the wonderful distinction of being God’s firstborn children. The inheritance we receive as firstborn is far grander than any inheritance we may receive in this present world. The apostle Peter describes our inheritance in this way, “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.” (1 Peter 1:4) Our heavenly inheritance as the firstborn of God’s family is the perfect, blissful existence in the world to come.

Can we have any confidence that we will be receiving and enjoying this heavenly inheritance? Yes, indeed! Our text goes on to declare that our names are “registered in heaven”. When we were born in the United States, we received a birth certificate which officially declared us citizens of this country. This was registered with the government in its official record books. So also and even more importantly, when we were spiritually born again into the family of God, our names were registered in heaven. This heavenly official record book certifies we are citizens of heaven. Nobody and nothing can void or nullify our official standing as citizens of heaven so long as we, by the grace of God, continue to believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

The final reference in our text to believers is “to the spirits of just men made perfect”. This phrase points to the blessed existence we will enjoy when we enter heaven. Immediately at the point of death our spirits or souls are separated from our bodies and soar to the lofty heights of heaven. Right away our souls are perfected without a single trace of a sinful nature. What a grand state this shall be, for we shall never again be plagued with sinful thoughts, feelings or emotions. The only thoughts, feelings and emotions residing in us will be holy and righteous.

Thus far the different references, words and terms in our text that depict us as believers in Christ Jesus.

The two references to God that remain in our text are truly important and comforting. The one is “to God the Judge of all”. When we became believers in the Holy Christian Church, we came to God the Judge of all. The Lord God whom we are joined to as being one with Him is our Judge. With Him sitting in judgment of all mankind on the great and final day of this world, we don’t fear His judgment of us. And why is that? It is because our Savior Jesus Christ has already taken away all our sins and iniquities that would have otherwise condemned us and separated us forever from God and heaven. Instead of being cast off into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing in hell, we will hear the welcoming voice of God saying to us, “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” (Mt. 25:34)

Finally, the wonderful God we have come to is the second person of the Godhead “Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.” Jesus is our Mediator and Advocate before the throne of God whose precious blood has cleansed us and made us acceptable to God and pleasing in His sight. So then, when we pray to God through Jesus, we find a heavenly Father who is ever ready and willing to hear and answer our prayers.

Which mountain shall we choose – Mt. Sinai with all its laws and deadly threats or Mt. Zion wherein is God’s saving grace in Christ Jesus and the future glory of heaven? May God in His rich grace and mercy help us to remain a part of Mt. Zion, the triumphant Church of believers. Amen.

