

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 25, 2019
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

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 to death." (21) The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." (22) **But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.** 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, to the spirits of the righteous 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.

Dear friends in Christ Jesus:

When I was in grade school my family lived in Minnesota and one summer my parents decided to take us to see the state capital. When we got into the St. Paul area my dad admitted being a bit confused about just how to get to the capital building but being a dad he wasn't about to stop to ask for directions. He'd find his way there one way or another and so he was quite relieved to see a huge dome towering in the distant sky-line. Soon we were parked in front of this ornate building with a huge dome on top of it. Dad said he'd go in and find out what time the tours were given – he returned and announced that he discovered the building was really a church – at which point mom said – I told you this wasn't right. We looked around a bit and discovered yet another building with a dome and ultimately arrived at our destination.

I guess the saying is true that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree – several years later while I was a student at the seminary I had a similar experience. I was scheduled to preach at a WELS congregation in little town in Wisconsin while the pastor was on vacation. For some reason I didn't have the address or directions along that Sunday morning – not to worry – the town would be small and how hard could it be to find a WELS church?

And sure enough I got to town and there was a church – a nice older building painted in white with a cemetery next to it – the name wasn't very visible; but this must be the place. So I grabbed my robe and bible and entered the building – only to discover that it was the Catholic Church. After driving around a bit I discovered the WELS church was a brand new building on the other side of town. At least I had allowed myself extra time so I wasn't late!

It's a dangerous thing to not know exactly where you are going – you might just end up in a completely different place than you intended. Interestingly enough the words of our text were written to people – like my dad and myself – people who thought that they knew the right way but were really focused on the wrong way.

There's a phenomenon that experienced mountain climbers are aware of that will help us to latch on to the lesson taught in our text. Mountain climbers need to look out for false summits. A false summit is a lesser peak of a great mountain. From the lower elevations it looms large – sometimes even blocking sight of the real summit and leading climbers far off course. From the true summit you can look down on the path you traveled and see that false summit. The false summit appears high and impressive when viewed from below, but no one would trade the view from it for the view from the true summit.

Our text has a similar concept in mind as it talks about Mount Sinai and Mount Zion -- warning

Theme: Don't Choose the Wrong Mountain

1. Mount Sinai is just a stopping place
2. Mount Zion is your home

This text was written to Christians who were under pressure from family and government to renounce their Savior and to seek their hopes of eternal life through obedience to the law and the religion of Judaism. If we stop to think about it we're also Christians who are under pressure to turn away from our Savior – maybe the pressure comes from job and family obligations, from non-Christian humanistic influences in the schools, the media or government programs. Our text helps us to consider what is at stake if we abandon our true home and the true faith as it urges us to remain faithful to our Savior God.

Mount Sinai certainly towers high in the minds of those who know the Old Testament Scriptures. It was there that God's people camped after they were delivered from their slavery in Egypt. It was not their destination – it was a stopping place. At Mount Sinai God taught his people about the reality of sin and its power. He reminded them that they were his treasured people whom he had carried out of Egypt so that he could give them the Promised Land. Our text reminds us that we have come to a far more impressive place than Mount Sinai.

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 to death." (21) The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."

Mount Sinai is real – you can still see it today as it towers in the wilderness. But what happened on that mountain was completely out of this world. The people saw a display of God's awesome power that filled them with fear – Exodus 19 & 20 record the events for us: **Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. (19) As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.** (Exodus 19:18-19 NIV)

When God spoke to Moses he told him that the people were not to come near the mountain. If an animal wandered into the forbidden area it was to be stoned to death or shot with arrows so the people would not touch it.

When God began to speak the words of his commands, the people begged Moses to speak to them because they feared the voice of the Lord. So Moses went up the mountain into the Lord's presence. The sights and the sounds were so terrifying that the entire camp of people including Moses trembled in fear. But all of that paled in comparison to the Words that God shared with Moses as he laid down the law for his people. Those Laws convict and condemn all people with their impossible demands of fearing and loving God above all things and keeping our hearts, minds, thoughts, words and actions free from sin. Love the Lord your God, don't misuse his name, pay attention to his word and the rest it provides by honoring the Sabbath; obey your parents, respect human life – do not murder, avoid sexual immorality, be content with the blessings the Lord give you, do not steal, speak well of everyone and do not spread harmful stories or speak hurtful words and have pure desires, setting aside the covetous nature of your sinful heart.

Such words pain our consciences and torment us as they convict us of our sins – reminding us that we do not and cannot live up to God's demands for our lives. The people who saw these awesome sights and first

heard those demands couldn't wait to leave. But time has a way of changing perspective on things. And so centuries later there were those who contended that the Law was a path to lead one to God and earn his blessings. The readers of this letter were under the influence of those teachings. They were being tempted to go back to Sinai – following the same path of their families, taking comfort in knowing what they had to do. The old Adam likes that way of thinking – thinking that we can earn or merit God's favor, thinking that we can do something to help with our salvation.

Still today people run to Mount Sinai and the Law – misled by the devil, misguided by conceit, even misinformed by their religious leaders and teachers, many think that they can come near to God by what they do. They've missed the point of the Law and the lessons of Sinai which point out the huge gap that exists between our lives and God's expectations for us. The law with its thunder and trumpets provides no hope or comfort, no forgiveness or peace for troubled consciences. All it can do is remind us of the just requirements of a just God who hates sin and demands the death of the sinner.

It's no wonder the inspired author of our text calls upon us not to choose the wrong mountain by stopping at Mount Sinai. We need the Law to point out our sin and to remind us of our need for the Savior who laid down his life for us on Calvary. But God's grace we have seen that Savior and his Holy Mountain of forgiveness. As our text says we have come **to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. 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, to the spirits of the righteous 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.**

Mount Zion is the mountain on which Jerusalem was built. But in this text (as in other places in Scripture) it is used as a symbol for heaven and the eternal dwelling place of God's children. All who trust in the Lord Jesus have eternal life as Jesus himself has proclaimed: **Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life.** (John 6:47 NIV) ... **and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.** (John 11:26 NIV)

Because we have been called to faith in Jesus, Mount Zion (heaven) is our home. If we contrast the sights and sounds of Sinai with Zion we can surely understand how foolish it would be to be to abandon the Lord Jesus for the Law. In Revelation 21 we are told how the city of God shines with glory of God, that is a place filled with eternal joy where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. It is there that the angels stand in joyful assembly before the throne of God lifting their voices in praise and joining them to the praise which come from our voices even now. There too are the saints who have gone on before us – the souls of those who have died in the Lord and are enjoying the bliss of eternal glory – the **spirits of righteous men made perfect** by the blood of Christ Jesus.

This is where the Lord Jesus has prepared a place for us – our room is reserved and paid for – using the words of our text; our names are written in heaven. For Jesus sake we are regarded as the first born – we are heirs with an eternal inheritance.

We have come before God – the judge of all men. And as we stand before him as his children clothed with the righteousness of his Son we do not fear. We await his just decree – forgiven for Jesus' sake and his invitation: **take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.**

Without Jesus and the blood which he shed for us there would be no access to the Father's throne, no accommodations in the mansions of heaven, no lasting inheritance from our heavenly Father, no opportunity to rejoice with the angels, no fellow believers to accompany us on our path to glory, no mercy in the judgment, and no hope beyond the grave.

It's no wonder our text concludes by pointing us to the blood of Jesus – the one who saved us by becoming one of us and offering his perfect life and shedding his perfect blood as the sacrifice for our sins. He's the one who has established a new covenant or agreement between us and God. The old covenant set up at Mount Sinai was a conditional one that required action on our part as well as God's part. God remained faithful to his end of the bargain – but we fall far short. The new covenant is different it is one sided God promises forgiveness for Jesus sake. In the OT the blood of Abel who was murdered by his brother is described as crying for vengeance – the blood of Christ cries for forgiveness, pardon and peace.

How striking the difference between Sinai and Zion. Which is better? Sinai or Zion? Which is the right Mountain for you: Sinai with the loud thunders of the law or the sweet Gospel message coming from Zion? Will it be the Law's curse: Your iniquities have separated you from God or the gospel's invitation, Come for all is ready and waiting? The endless torments of hell or the eternal joys of heaven?

Through the work of the Holy Spirit who calls us to faith in the Lord Jesus, the answer is Zion. And so with the Spirit's leading, we confidently stand at the foot of Mount Zion knowing that one day we will enjoy eternal rest on that glorious Mount. Amen.