

Rehearsing for Heaven

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[0 : 00] to know what we have received from Jesus Christ and a response of thankfulness. And when I was thinking of what all this was about, I was thinking of a situation where a friend in the parish that I was in before this one in Pender Harbor, who was a commercial fisherman, was out on the crew of a fishing boat off the coast of Alaska with seven other crew members.

And they were out in very stormy seas. It was a very windy and rainy day, very big waves. And he was in the morning. He went out to the deck and had a cup of coffee.

And out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a bright flash of red. And so he got the crew members to tell the captain to go over to this place where he had been looking.

And he finally convinced them. And they went in that direction. And the little light got brighter and brighter. And sure enough, they got quite close. And it was a lifeboat.

And in the lifeboat were five fishermen whose boat had capsized. And they'd been out there for about seven days with just water and a little bit of food.

[1 : 12] And they had their survival suits. And they'd been living in these things for seven days. And my friends said the first thing that struck them as they pulled them aboard was how much they stank.

They said that the smell was almost overpowering. So they took their clothes away from them, gave them new ones, threw the clothes overboard, and gave them food, shower, and took them into port as well.

So they left their fishing early to bring them back to Prince Rupert. And these guys lost everything in that boat. So my friend and the crew members gave them money as well to help them out.

Now, these guys who they saved, they're from Washington State. And they said, oh, we'll look you up and call you and let you know how things are. And we want to thank you as well. But, you know, my friend and the crew members of that boat never heard from these guys again.

And it was a shocking thing for my friend because he said these guys would have died out there. It would have been very, very difficult to spot them. And it was by the grace of God, quite literally, that they were spotted.

[2 : 23] And so there was no letter, no phone call, and there was no money that was offered in response as well. And that is a picture of what is going on for the people who this letter of Hebrews is written for because they are, in a sense, forgetful people.

They are people like those fishermen who have been saved, and yet there is this lack of thankfulness at what had happened. In fact, there was a real temptation to turn away from this God because of suffering in their lives, because of things that are going on that had great significance around them.

There was a temptation not to persevere in their following of Christ. And so this word is written for us as well because as Christians we have received extraordinary gifts at the hand of God in Jesus Christ.

But because of the pressures and because of the sufferings of this life, we also tend to forget what we are grateful for. This passage is wonderful because it clearly reminds us of the greatness of the grace that we have in Jesus so that we might be thankful.

John Calvin wrote it really well, what this little passage that we are reading today is all about. He says the writer of the Hebrews writes it to allure us, to love and to desire this grace that he has given to us.

[3 : 49] And hopefully that is what that word is doing for us this morning. What we have here to describe this is two covenants, old and new. And he uses two mountains, a physical one and a spiritual one, to describe them.

The physical mountain is Mount Sinai. And it doesn't mention it by name, but this is where the law was given in the wilderness to Moses for the people of God. And in it God's will is revealed to them. God brings them into relationship with himself. But there are actually negative things about the giving of that law that is brought up in this passage. There's two things that are striking about the giving of the law of the old covenant when you look through verses 18 through 21.

The first is that it fills the senses of touch and seeing and hearing. And it's not necessarily pleasant. In verses 18 and 19 at the beginning of that verse, we are reminded that it is about what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet.

There are spectacular signs of the awesomeness of God that's described here in Exodus 19 and 20. The other aspect of the giving of the law that's emphasized besides this filling of the senses with all of these things is that there is fear that you see in those verses as well.

[5 : 13] So if you continue on at the end of verse 19, the hearers entreat that no further message be spoken to them. And the reason for that was that when people saw the thunder and lightning in Exodus 20 and the trumpet and saw the mountain of smoke, they trembled with fear.

And since they stayed at a distance, they asked Moses, You go and speak to God and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die. There's a frightening aspect to what was going on there.

A fear that separated them from God. And not only that, it says as you go further down, they could not endure the order that was given. That even animals had to be stoned if they touched Mount Sinai.

And then in verse 20 as it goes on, So terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I tremble with fear. What the writer of the Hebrews is doing here is reminding the readers that they do not come to a mountain like this one that is very physical and overwhelms the senses.

Nor does the mountain that they are called to involve fear that separates them from God. And this is a word for us today that we need to hear.

[6 : 31] Because the things that fill our senses tend to impress us more than we are impressed by Jesus. And there is much in our culture and our technology today that fills our senses.

Because there is information that seems more relevant and influential that fills and streams into our eyes and our ears. And that information often has an urgency that demands that we make it a priority.

But not only that, we are also committed very much so to the senses, to the things that we can touch. Because our family and our friends, as well as our material possessions that we have in abundance, are things that we are very easily committed to above the blessings that Jesus Christ gives, above the things that we do not see.

And as with Mount Sinai, there are also great fears that surround us today. The war on terrorism, the anthrax scare, possibility of further terrorist action, and a weakened economy.

They add to the fears that were already with us before September 11th. And so we can all very easily lose sight of what we have in Christ because of the influence of those fears.

[7 : 49] We can live as though we are separate from God as a result. So in a sense, we are very much in the same sort of situation that the hearers, those first hearers of Hebrews, were in.

It was very appropriate. I don't know how many of you saw the memorial service at the cathedral in Washington, D.C. for the victims of September 11th. But he read a Bible reading that's very appropriate to this passage, to that fear.

He says, That was the appropriate Bible reading because in it, the good news of Jesus overcoming separateness from God was being spoken into an atmosphere of fear.

And that's where this great contrast with Mount Zion, of Mount Zion, comes in. Because Mount Zion is a spiritual mountain. And it has two striking features.

It is that people are gathered into the very presence of God. It's the opposite of being pushed away or being separated from God by fear. And the second feature of it is Jesus Christ, the love and the saving work of Jesus Christ, who is the one through whom we come into the presence of God.

[9 : 19] I often wondered what Mount Zion was when I was growing up. You hear it in hymns and you read it in the Bible. It's mentioned about 20 times in Scripture. And I'll just tell you very briefly that Mount Zion was a stronghold that King David conquered and captured.

And he made it the religious center of his kingdom by installing the Ark of the Covenant. The presence of God symbolically was there. And then there's Solomon.

Solomon built the temple north of Zion and he put the Ark there. And so in a sense he expanded what Zion was to include all of Jerusalem. And that place was the place where all the tribes of old Israel met together in God's presence.

And so there's a significance about calling what we have come to a spiritual Mount Zion because it is the spiritual meeting place of the new Israel. Everyone who has put their trust in God throughout history are in that community, in the meeting place of the new Israel.

And so verse 22 and 23 speaks to every believer in Jesus very directly. It says that you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels and festal gatherings, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just people made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel.

[11:00] And the blood of Abel actually calls for revenge because Cain murdered him. But Jesus' blood is grace. It forgives and it reconciles us into that community in God's presence.

And that is a beautiful picture. It is something that is very hard for us to fathom and to take in completely. It is about what it means for all God's people to be gathered together in the presence of God, where angels joyfully serve God, where redeemed people throughout history join them.

And each person comes to Jesus who brought them there. It's really a picture of life together in the presence of God and serving him joyfully. It's a glimpse into heaven, and it's really a brief look into our inheritance, which is something that is too wonderful and great for us to wrap our minds around. But I want you to notice that in this glorious picture, there's not this sense of dread or separation that we saw in the physical mountain. Because in it, God is no longer unapproachable or causing fear that drives people away from him.

That is because of Jesus. He has initiated this new covenant of bringing God close to us. And it's very interesting that God in this passage actually does not change from that fearsome picture of Mount Sinai.

[12:26] He doesn't change from then to the book of Hebrews. He's still awe-inspiring. If you flip over the page at the top, it says in verse 29, it still says the same words from Deuteronomy.

For our God is, now he is, a consuming fire. The difference is that Jesus changes the people who approach God.

He takes the guilt of sin away from him by shedding of his blood. His forgiveness takes away fear that separates. So there's a change that takes place in those who come to God.

And that's why in Hebrews 10.19 it says that we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus. And that's a huge change. It is a change in the people of God because of Jesus. And it's important to recognize how immense this grace is. Because it is all about the love of God who desires and works sacrificially so that we might come into the very community of God forever.

[13:30] It is great grace. And there is importance in this passage for us today because that picture that we see in those two verses, 22 and 23, is the goal of our lives.

The new Jerusalem that that describes has not come into our lives fully yet. We will come into it when we die and when Jesus comes again. In fact, it's so certain that this passage says we have already come to it.

But until then, all of us seated here who follow Jesus Christ are in a sense on a pilgrimage. We are walking towards Mount Zion, towards that city.

God is present in our lives by his Holy Spirit moving us to that destination, moving us to the city of God. And there's great implications for us in each of our lives about this.

Because if we have received this great grace of living relationship with God, of an inheritance of heaven, then we have really an obligation of loyalty and obedience to his voice.

[14:40] We don't actually see Mount Zion, yet we are to live for the things of Mount Zion. We're to walk by faith and not by sight. And it's very clear, if we really think about doing this, that there is difficulty about it.

You know, there's a temptation to go back to the material Mount Sinai. We tend to put great importance on the things that we hear and see and touch.

And not only that, but different fears do come into our lives that are very present and real. And God seems far away. And that's why it's important for us to apply this to our lives with verse 28, which is at the bottom there.

There's two things that verse 28 does for us to help us persevere in our walk towards Zion. The first part of it says, Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. There is the mark of spiritual maturity. It is thankfulness. You can't have a mature faith and be ungrateful. It's impossible.

[15 : 49] If you are aware of what Jesus has done for you, and your inheritance is clear to you, you cannot help but be thankful. It's unnatural not to do that. In the same way that it was unnatural for those fishermen not to be thankful for having their lives saved and so much goodness bestowed upon them.

In fact, the whole book of Hebrews is really about telling us the unseen riches that we have in Jesus Christ and calling us all to be thankful in response to that.

And I think that, you know, if you think practically about how this works in our lives, I'm sure, in fact, I would guarantee that if you were to get up each morning and consciously thank God for what he has given you in Jesus and your relationships and your whole outlook in life, what he has done through the giving of Jesus, our lives would be changed.

Our lives would be deepened and strengthened in their commitment to God. And I also know that each of us at St. John's did this. Our life as a Christian community together would be transformed as well.

There would begin more and more to bear resemblance to the Mount Zion that is our inheritance. And that's why prayer and the reading of God's words are so vital to Christian life, because doing it actually shapes our lives, because it drives our hearts again and again to the reason for our thankfulness, to this vision of Mount Zion that is our inheritance.

[17 : 19] So thankfulness is the response to this kingdom that has been given. But secondly, verse 28 offers the logical follow-up to thankfulness.

It says, Let us offer to God acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. You see, if we're thankful because of Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the only right response is to offer God acceptable worship now.

And very simply, worship is the living out of our thankfulness. It is acting on the thankfulness that's in our hearts. The service, the praise and the worship, the serving of God in heaven and in this Mount Zion is continuous.

It's really clear in that description of the city, but also if you read Revelation as well. And I know for a fact that in heaven there will not be a 7.45 a.m. service, there won't be a 9 a.m. service, and there won't be an 11 a.m. service.

In fact, there won't even be a 7.15 p.m. service either, because the praise and worship of God never cease. And this is a model for our worship.

[18 : 34] Acceptable worship means serving God throughout the week, because he is present in our lives throughout the week. And that worship takes many forms. It is a life of thankfulness.

Every time you think of your career, or your work raising a family, or your study, or your relationships in terms of serving God, that is worship. Every time you point somebody towards Jesus who doesn't yet know him, you are worshipping.

And this is a growth area for all of us to, in our secular lives, understand that we are called to worship as people who belong to Mount Zion. But we also worship as we serve each other in many different ways at St. John's as well.

I wonder how many people who come on Sunday morning see that we are part of Mount Zion. Do we somehow manifest what will be ours one day?

Because all of those things are things that we are in our pilgrimage towards. We are in some way to live out what we will one day receive. And people who come to our church for the first time would be deeply, deeply blessed if we model that picture of the new Jerusalem in our lives here.

[19 : 48] That we are thankful to God for what he has given. That we are in relationship with one another, knowing that God is present with us. And that we will live forever together in this new kingdom.

Our prayer really needs to be, and it is a prayer that comes right out of this passage, that God would grant us a deep desire for this city. So much so that we would live for it.

That we would love the grace that has been given to us in Jesus. And so clearly laid out in this passage. It's really a prayer as well that we would deepen our commitment to serve God, not only with our lips, but throughout our lives.

And so the words that begin Ephesians are particularly appropriate for us as a response to what we see in this passage. Thanks be to God, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

For Jesus Christ's sake, we have this, and we give him thanks and praise with our lives. Amen.
Amen.