

Title: What's on Your Mountain?
Date: February 11, 2018
Subject: The advantages of being with Christ.
Scripture: Hebrews 12:18 - 29

I came across a story about a man who always looked down as he walked the streets of New York City. It wasn't that he was shy, introverted or leery of making eye contact in the big city. He discovered that he could find coins, paper money, earrings and other jewelry by always looking down. He also discovered a way to find bruises, scrapes and bumps as he stumbled and tripped into mailboxes, light poles, people and occasionally traffic. But he also missed seeing blue skies, puffy clouds, the joy of children's faces, and the lights at Christmas.

I remember walking into the stand for deer hunting. We followed a trail through the pines, down the hill, across a slough of shallow water that was hopefully frozen, around the balsams, past the huge white pine to the cedar where my stand was. I'd follow and watch the steps of the person in front or look down to see if there were fresh deer tracks that crossed our path. I didn't vary my gaze. There could have been a deer ten feet off the path and I wouldn't have seen it.

When we're walking it's important to look where we're going or we can easily miss out. The Scripture before us provides a stark contrast of the direction we're looking.

READ 12:18-21

The unnamed mountain in v. 18 is Mt. Sinai. It's the place Moses received the Ten Commandments and many more instructions for how the people of Israel were to relate to God and people. Cecil B. DeMille's movie *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston tried to portray the giving of the Law. Fireballs of light spun off the swirling fire tornado to etch words on the tablets as a deep voice intoned the commands. Heston clung close to the mountain and hid his face to show how Moses tried to shield himself. The famous director and actor didn't do the scene justice and couldn't.

Here's an expanded description from when the event took place. "There was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 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... When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we

will die.” Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was” (Exodus 19:16-18; 20:18-21).

The experience was more dramatic than the plagues had been as they weren’t affected by them. Then they were casual observers of the destruction. Now they were implicated in the shocking spectacle and they didn’t like what they were seeing and hearing. The people were terrified and rightly so.

Besides the Ten Commandments Moses received were very specific and detailed directions as to how the Lord was to be worshipped. There were the building plans for the tabernacle. There were the particulars about the kinds of sacrifices that would be acceptable. There were designs for the garments the priests were to wear. For instance, the robe for Aaron, the first high priest, was to have blue, purple and scarlet pomegranates embroidered all around the bottom hem with gold bells alternating between the pomegranates. The purpose for the bells wasn’t for show but so that when Aaron would enter the Holy Place before the Lord and come out the sound of the bells would be heard and he wouldn’t die (Exodus 28:35). Later Aaron was commanded to always wash his hands and feet before entering the Tent of Meeting or he would die (Exodus 30:19-21). How’s that for seriousness?

Sinai was a literal mountain where the people were forbidden to come close or they would suffer the consequence of death. Anyone who didn’t pay attention to Moses’ warnings, really the Lord’s warnings, were left with no alternative. They could not escape God’s judgment. The Lord accomplished his purpose. The people stayed away as they were terrified and awe struck and didn’t sin, for a while. It was just a few days later while Moses was still on Mount Sinai, the very place where they kept their distance and didn’t want God to speak to them because they were afraid they would die (Exodus 20:19), that they coerced Aaron into making a golden calf to be their gods they would worship for leading them out of Egypt. By the way, when Aaron later was blaming the people for making him make the calf, he told Moses, “They gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” (Exodus 32:24). Anyone else suspicious of his story?

In contrast there is another mountain. It’s a heavenly one, not of earth. It’s full of light, not darkness. It’s filled with joy not terror and fear. It’s unseen, for now. It bids us to come close, to approach. It’s grace filled. It has far greater promises and rewards than the return to Judaism or placing confidence in some other belief system. This is because the representative is far greater than Moses and speaks from a higher platform. Jesus Christ speaks to us from the presence of God.

READ 12:22-24

Those who place their trust in Christ have not only been allowed to approach but to enter. It's the fulfillment of the grand theme at Christmas of the name given to the baby – Immanuel. God is with us. And we are with God. God, more particularly God the Father, is the chief citizen of Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem. It's where he lives. It's his dwelling place.

Let's look at the identity of the other inhabitants. There are angels, thousands upon thousands of them. Some translations state the number as innumerable while others descriptively say "myriads." I like that term. Though it means a countless or extremely great number, it evokes an impressive image of a whole bunch of these beings who are devoted to the Lord and filled with joy.

The next residents are the church of the firstborn. It's those who are in the unique position of possessing the inheritance rights and privileged position in the family. All believers in Christ share the same rights as heirs with Christ. Their names are written in heaven. Seven times the book of life is mentioned in Revelation. It's the heavenly book which has the roster of all those who've come to Christ for salvation.

God is brought back into center stage at this point. He's identified as the judge. It's not as the Judge who is to be feared. From the immediate context he would be the vindicator. He'll vindicate or prove that believers are right. They've been justified, declared "Not guilty" by the Chief Justice who welcomes them home.

Next is the spirits of righteous men made perfect. We can connect them with the people group at the beginning of the chapter. They're the Old Testament saints, the pre-cross saints, who looked forward in faith to God bringing the Messiah, the Christ, into the world. They had faith God would do what he promised.

There's one more inhabitant of Mount Zion. You could say, the best has been saved for last. Called by the name Jesus to distinguish the Son of God from the Father. He mediates a better covenant because it is the fullest expression of God's plan. He not only brokered the deal but paid the price for its consummation. It required him giving himself to seal the covenant. Now he's in heaven preparing our spots in the celestial city.

This list of heavenly occupants puts believers in pretty great company. A few weeks ago I threw out the thought about how we'll be included in the roll call of faith. Will we be listed for great acts of faith or for faith shown through perseverance? Whichever way, we'll be in the hall because of our faith in Christ.

There's one more contrast. This goes back long before the Mosaic covenant. Abel was killed by his brother Cain because Cain was upset the Lord didn't accept his sacrifice. Abel's blood cried out for justice through vengeance. Christ's blood shows pardon and God's love to cover the wrongdoing of sin.

We come to the point of the contrasts. READ 12:25-27.

The earth shook when God spoke on the mountain. The people of Israel couldn't escape. There was no safe place where they would be protected from him. He knew where they lived. They were in deep trouble if they refused the Lord, the one who spoke on earth and shook it.

The second shaking is a future event. This time it won't be a regional event but will affect the entire earth and the heavens. Here's how it's described in various Scriptures – “Mountains quake because of Him and the hills dissolve; indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence, the world and all the inhabitants in it” (Nahum 1:5). “The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed... That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat” (2 Peter 3:10, 12). “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

God will wipe out the stuff that can't remain – the created things such as the earth, the heavens and all the stuff in them. He gets rid of the stuff that can be shaken so he can keep that which can't be shaken, that will last forever. He provides the answer as to what that is -- the kingdom which is comprised of those who belong to Christ, whether they are pre-cross saints or post-cross saints. This is God's promise that the perishable will be clothed with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality (1 Corinthians 15:53, 54).

Since the Lord exerts that kind of unfathomable power and ability, don't think of refusing Him, the one who speaks from heaven and shakes the universe. There is no safety in turning away from God. Anyone who fails to listen to Christ will fall into God's judgment.

Melanie Mudge is part of a ministry (Axis) “that seeks to help the next generation have lifelong faith by resourcing parents and faith leaders” (Family Life Today, 2/7/28). She talked about the world of millennials and younger. “I think the biggest thing that we realized is—there are a lot of other ideas out there that seem to promise life, and fulfillment, and flourishing; and they don't actually lead to that, but teens believe it anyways. Somehow, they weren't learning that the gospel's the *only* thing that leads to life and that it does have relevance for *every* situation and everything we do. Instead, they *felt* like: “This doesn't mean enough. This isn't big enough, and it's not fulfilling enough. I'm going to go elsewhere.” And that's why they were walking away.”

People, young and older, place their trust and longing for security in their own goodness, the protection of money, the wisdom of science, or other religious belief systems. The book of Hebrews boldly proclaims that Christ and what offers is vastly better, far superior to anything else people could go to for hope and peace.

Ryan Stevenson song The Gospel – “A restless generation, We're turning over every stone, Hoping to find salvation. In a world that's left us cold, Can we get back to the altar? Back to the arms of our first love. There's only one way to the Father, And He's calling out to us...The Gospel makes a way.”

Don't refuse the Lord. The second point could be called a restatement of the first in a more heartening tone. READ 12:28, 29.

Be thankful and worship the Lord. Thankful for what the Lord has done in bringing us to Christ. Thankful for the salvation he brings.

Worship. Quite a few of the translations phrase it as serving the Lord. William Temple definition of worship: "the submission of all our nature to God...the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose-and all of this gathered up in adoration." Worship is not just what comes from our lips but what comes from our hearts and hands.

We're to worship with reverence and awe. There's nothing wrong with being afraid of God. God hasn't changed. "God is a consuming fire." Most of us have a healthy fear of water. That doesn't mean we don't fish and swim in lakes. I use "we" in the group sense since I haven't fished since high school and I don't know how to swim. Those of us who do venture out in a boat, or on the ice of Lake Winnebago do so with a respect for what water can do. Or electricity....

Peter, in writing about the impending shaking, asks a probing question, "Since everything will be dissolved in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to conduct yourselves in holiness and godliness as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming...in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells." (2 Peter 3:11, 13).

Another Scripture, "Understand the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh" (Romans 13:11-14).

There's a story of an old Navajo Indian who made a lot of money from oil. Periodically he left the reservation to see his banker. He'd say, "Money all gone. Sheep all dead. Cattle all stolen. Fences all down. Everything bad." The banker would go into the vault, stuff money into bags and set it in front of the man. As he counted the money, his eyes would begin to gleam. He'd approach the banker and say, "Sheep all well. Cattle all back. Fences all up. Everything good." Then he'd leave. He'd counted his resources and knew what was available to him. We have resources that do more than give flimsy security. We need to keep looking forward and upward to Christ and his provision so we not only don't refuse him but worship and serve him.