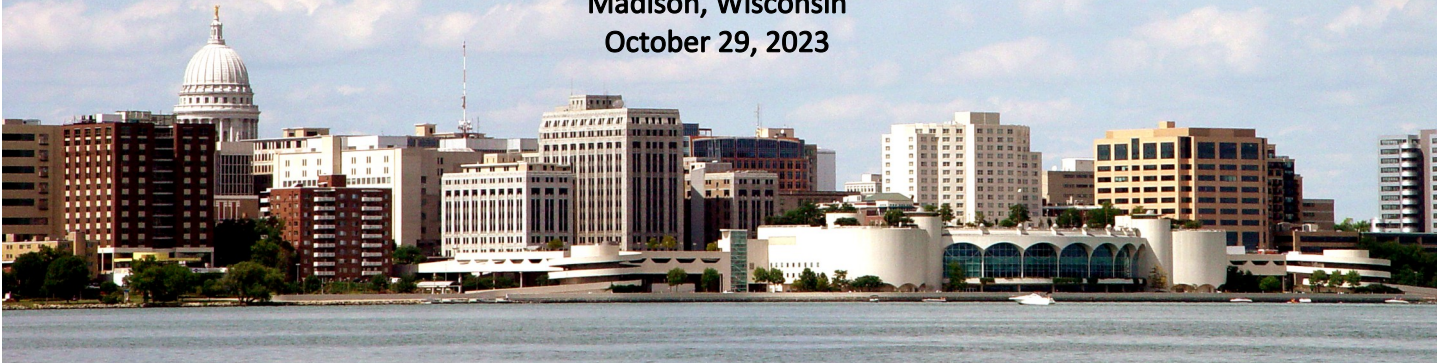


Sinai vs. Zion

Hebrews 12:18-24

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
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Good morning, and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting this morning, we are glad to have you with us. We'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card online if you can, or you can use one of the cards from the pew in front of you. Whatever works for you, we would love to hear from you, and we invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns.

In terms of upcoming events, I'll put in a good word for the Lock-in that's coming up on Friday, November 10, hosted by the church in Spencer, Wisconsin. They've done this for many years, Spencer is a solid congregation led by some good men serving as elders. This is the group that took over Beaver Creek Bible Camp this past year, but they hold the lock-in at the YMCA in Stevens Point (about 2 hours straight north of here). They rent the Y for the whole night, and this is for ages 8-18 (younger if you have a chaperone). Corey Waddell, from the Bear Valley congregation in Denver, will be the guest speaker this year, and they have devotionals planned throughout the night (at 9 p.m., at 11, and also at 3 in the morning). They'll have games throughout the night, usually some swimming, and I would highly recommend heading up there if you can.

Before we return to our study of Hebrews 12, we want to make sure that we preach the good news! And the good news is that God loves us so much that he sent his only Son to this earth to save us. He lived a perfect life, he died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up alive on the first day of the week. We respond to this good news through faith, repentance, confession, and baptism (an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins). And we have several examples to share this morning, starting with an update from Steven Hunter, who preaches at the Glendale Road congregation down in Murray, Kentucky. I believe this might have been where Spencer worshiped when he went to school down that way. But they posted earlier this week and they say that "Husband and wife, Nathan and Victoria put on Christ yesterday (Galatians 3:27)." It is so good to see a husband and wife sharing their faith like this!

And then we have an update from Eric Obeng Asante, who reports from Nigeria this week and says, "Gospel Chariot Evangelism at Elele. Two baptisms recorded so far from house to house evangelism. More prospects to follow up. May God keep the souls faithful." And I don't know whether you can see this from the pictures, but these baptisms happened on a truck! And that's the reference to "Gospel Chariot Evangelism" in this post. I had heard about this before, so I went to their Facebook page and found many pictures. The "Gospel Chariot" is a truck that's been converted into a mobile church facility that they take from village to village in Nigeria.

One of the doors folds down as a platform to speak from with a podium. They have a generator, and lights, and a sound system. They carry Bibles and other material to give away, and they have a baptistry in there. But I just thought this was pretty interesting, and I thought you might appreciate knowing that some good things are happening in Nigeria. In so many pictures I saw hundreds of people gathered around – standing and sitting on the ground as well as in their own lawn chairs. But we share this to emphasize the good news, and if you would like to know more, I will gladly come to your home to study. I won't be in a gospel chariot; I'll be in a Subaru, but if we can help in some way with your obedience to the gospel, please get in touch.

This morning, we return to our study of Hebrews, and we come to yet another contrast. Hebrews was written to encourage some early disciples to keep on living by faith, because Jesus is better. And throughout this book, we've seen that Jesus represents a better messenger (in Chapter 1). He is better than the angels (also in Chapter 1). He is better than Moses (in Chapter 3). He provides a better rest (in Chapter 4). He is a better priest (in Chapters 5-8). He has mediated a better covenant and is a better tabernacle (in Chapter 9). He is a better sacrifice (in Chapter 10).

And now, as we come near the end of Hebrews, we find in Chapter 12 yet another contrast between Jesus and Old Covenant, as the author invites us to picture two mountains: On one hand, we have Mount Sinai (representing the Old), and on the other hand we have Mount Zion (representing the New). And as far as we're concerned, the author focuses on the contrast between the experience of those who have come to worship at these two mountains. And there is a difference, at least there should be! Our goal this morning will be to come to a much greater appreciation of what happens when we come together to worship. This isn't a "this is what we need to do" type of lesson. No, today's passage simply encourages us to be in awe, to be thankful for the privilege of worship under the New Covenant. And it's the difference between two mountains.

So, let's notice the contrast in Hebrews 12:18-24,

¹⁸ For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, ¹⁹ and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not bear the command, "IF EVEN A BEAST TOUCHES THE MOUNTAIN, IT WILL BE STONED." ²¹ And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, "I AM FULL OF FEAR and trembling." ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, ²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.

This morning, let's come to a deeper appreciation of what we have under the New Covenant by taking a look at this contrast between these two mountains.

I. And we'll start by taking a look at MOUNT SINAI.

But did you notice that the author doesn't even tell us the name of this first mountain? He merely describes it, and those who read this for the first time would have immediately been able to recognize that this is Mount Sinai, because the words he uses are almost identical to what we find back in the book of Exodus. Now I want us to imagine the Israelites. They've been enslaved in Egypt for hundreds of years, they witness the Ten Plagues, and Moses leads them out into the wilderness. They're following God in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They cross over the Red Sea, the Egyptians chase them down but are drowned in the

sea. They keep moving and run out of water. God provides water, and then food, and then they come to the base of this mountain in the middle of nowhere. And God has Moses set up boundaries around the mountain. In my mind, I'm seeing police tape, and the message is: Stay away! In Exodus 19:12-13, God says through Moses, ***"Beware that you do not go up on the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. No hand shall touch him, but he shall surely be stoned or shot through; whether beast or man, he shall not live."*** Then, three days later, in the morning, they suddenly see ***"thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled."*** According to Exodus 19:18, the mountain is covered in smoke, ***"and the smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently."*** In Exodus 19:19, ***"When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder."*** And as a result of this, the people are absolutely terrified; they tremble; they stand at a distance. God then gives the Ten Commandments to Moses, and according to Exodus 20:19, the people then beg Moses, ***"Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die."*** They actually beg God to stop talking. It's too terrifying!

And that's the picture we have here in Hebrews 12. So, as we think about the difference between the Old and the New, as we think about the difference between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, I would ask: What would our worship be like today if all we knew about God came from Mount Sinai? Worship under the Old Covenant (under the Law of Moses) was not always this emotionally uplifting joyous experience. No, worship back then was sometimes terrifying, intimidating, even dangerous, we might say.

So, we come back to Hebrews 12, and we come to seven basic features of worship at Mount Sinai. First of all, they worshiped at the base of an actual mountain. They were not allowed to touch it, but it could be ***"touched."*** It was an actual mountain. Secondly, this mountain is described as being engulfed by ***"blazing fire."*** It's characterized by ***"darkness"*** and ***"gloom."*** There's a ***"whirlwind"*** involved. And in verse 19, there's the ***"blast of a trumpet."*** And the trumpet doesn't seem to be playing a song. This isn't a concert of some kind. No, this is a warning, this is a train horn, this is a tornado siren, this is a fire alarm. This trumpet is warning of danger. And then we have a reference to ***"words"*** being spoken, but those words are spoken in such a way that the people who hear beg for those words to stop, ***"We can't handle hearing the voice of God!"*** Do we see the sense of separation? Do we see the sense of fear in this passage? On Mount Sinai, God is terrifying. And the people who read the book of Hebrews for the very first time were tempted to go back to this.

II. Well, this leads us to the other mountain! Over here we have Mount Sinai, but over here we have MOUNT ZION.

And notice the contrast: On one hand, Mount Sinai was off limits, but on the other hand, the author says, ***"But you have come to Mount Zion..."*** In other words, Mount Zion is approachable! And when he says ***"but you have come,"*** he's not talking about some future experience in heaven, but this is here and now. These people, as they read this message for the very first time, had come to Mount Zion. And so, as they met for worship in homes, in caves, in hiding due to persecution, in congregations that were large or small, even in those circumstances, these people ***"have come to Mount Zion."*** They've accepted the Lord's invitation to come near to him in worship. And certainly, drawing near to God has been a recurring theme in this message. With reference to prayer, the author has already said (in Hebrews 4:16), for example, ***"Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*** And again (in Hebrews 10:22), we are invited to ***"...draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith."*** What an awesome invitation! Instead of experiencing fear, and dread, and this terrifying distance from God, we as God's people under the New Covenant have been invited onto the mountain itself. And as with Mount Sinai, we also have seven descriptions of Mount Zion...

A. ...starting with three somewhat parallel names for this place: But you have come to MOUNT ZION and to the CITY OF THE LIVING GOD, the HEAVENLY JERUSALEM.

All three of these terms refer to the place, but the place isn't literal. This is a *"heavenly"* place, a spiritual place. This goes back to what we read in verse 18, *"For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched."* We used that in our discussion of Mount Sinai, to show that Mount Sinai could be touched – you would die if you touched it, but it was a touchable mountain. Mount Zion, on the other hand, cannot be touched. Mount Zion is a spiritual city.

And in this passage, Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, is somewhere we've already come. In fact, as I understand it, we are in this place right now. As we worship, we assemble at Mount Zion, the *"city of the living God."* And we note the contrast: On one hand, anyone who touched Mount Sinai would die, but Mount Zion is described as a city of life. And the fact that we're talking about a *"city"* reminds us that worship brings us together as a community. This *"city"* is a place of fellowship, a place of sharing.

B. Continuing with the last part of verse 22, we also find that when we assemble for worship we come to MYRIADS OF ANGELS.

The footnote in the NASB gives us a peek behind the scenes with a reference to *"angels in festive gathering."* The King James Version refers to an *"innumerable company of angels."* The NIV refers to *"angels in joyful assembly."* The ESV refers to *"innumerable angels in festal gathering."* So, as opposed to the doom and gloom of Mount Sinai, New Covenant worship is pictured as a massive celebration. We think about what Jesus says in Luke 15 in the parable of the lost coin, where he says that *"In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."* When we celebrate someone turning to God here on this earth, we are joined by the angels in heaven who have come together in this *"joyful assembly."* And the author of Hebrews gives us this reminder for a reason: Don't give this up, and when we worship, let's remember that we are a part of this! What a blessing!

C. Continuing into verse 23, we find that this gathering is described as THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY AND CHURCH OF THE FIRSTBORN WHO ARE ENROLLED IN HEAVEN.

As I understand it, the word *"firstborn"* is used nine times in the New Testament: Seven of those are references to Jesus, one is a reference to the firstborn in Egypt (in Stephen's sermon in Acts 7), and then we have this reference here, which is the only time this word is plural. And this makes it unique, as the author is referring to the *"church of the firstborn"* (plural), the *"church of the firstborn ones."* So this is a reference to us! As God's children, we are the *"firstborn ones."* As we discussed a week or two ago, the firstborn would have double the inheritance of all the other children. The firstborn would inherit the responsibility of spiritual leadership within the family. The firstborn was the child of privilege. Under the New Covenant, though, all of us are firstborn. There are no second or third-born children in God's family. And unlike Esau, we have not traded our birthright for a bowl of soup. But instead, as God's firstborn, our names have been *"enrolled in heaven."* Everyone belongs.

D. Continuing into the middle of verse 23, when we assemble for worship, we come to GOD, THE JUDGE OF ALL.

And at first, we might think of God as a judge being intimidating. A bit like we might think of seeing a cop when we're going 85 in 65. But for God's people, God as Judge is comforting, because *"...there is now no*

condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (according to Paul in Romans 8:1). God as Judge, then, not only condemns the wicked, but he also rewards the righteous. And as Judge, God will also make things right. When we've been wronged, we want a judge to fix it, to render judgment in our favor. And I think that's what's going on here. We worship God, therefore, as *"the Judge of all."*

E. Continuing to the end of verse 23, when we assemble for worship, we assemble alongside THE SPIRITS OF THE RIGHTEOUS MADE PERFECT.

So, these are not people with bodies, but these are spirits. As I understand it, those who have gone on before us are also worshipping God alongside us (in a sense) in their present form (in Paradise). In a sense, our voices are joining with theirs around the throne of God. But they have been *"made perfect,"* that is, these are those who have finished the race successfully. These are those who are now in that great *"cloud of witnesses"* (from verse 1 in this chapter). These are those who are absent from the body but present with the Lord. They are not "sleeping" in the grave, but their spirits are with the Lord.

F. Continuing into verse 24, when we assemble for worship, we also come to JESUS, THE MEDIATOR OF A NEW COVENANT.

And unlike Moses, Jesus is not terrified to stand before God on the mountain; no, Jesus is God, he is the sinless Son of God, and he is the *"mediator of a new [and better] covenant."*

G. And finally, the climax here is that we come to THE SPRINKLED BLOOD, WHICH SPEAKS BETTER THAN THE BLOOD OF ABEL.

The blood of Abel, of course, was calling out for vengeance. When God confronted Cain back in Genesis 4:10, he said, *"What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground."* Abel's blood was calling out for justice. The blood of Jesus, though, speaks *"better"* than the blood of Abel. The blood of Jesus answers that call for justice, and the blood of Jesus calls out for grace and mercy and forgiveness. Cain was banished, while we are invited into God's family, while we are invited to come to God's table.

And by the way, out of twelve times that it is used, this is the last use of the word *"better"* in the book of Hebrews. Jesus' blood speaks better than the blood of Abel, and when we assemble for worship, the blood of Jesus speaks to us (in a sense). From one week to another, we fail to live up to God's righteousness. We sin and fall short of the glory of God, but the blood of Jesus speaks to us.

Conclusion:

So, what's the point? What's the message here? What does all of this mean for us assembled here in Madison, Wisconsin, this morning? As I said at the beginning, this isn't a "go out and do something" kind of lesson, but this is an "appreciate what we have" kind of lesson. Let's be thankful that we come to worship, not to Mount Sinai, but to Mount Zion. By the way, do you remember how many people died when Moses came down from Mount Sinai in Exodus 32? 3,000! Do you remember how many were saved when God's new law first went out from Mount Zion in Acts 2? Also, 3,000! Let's be thankful that we don't have to approach that blazing, smoking, terrifying mountain. But instead, let's be thankful that today we come to Mount Zion. Let's sing it like we mean it this morning, because Jesus is better!

Let's go to God in prayer and then John will lead us in a song as we think about what we've learned this morning:

Our Father in Heaven,

We've come before you this morning with joyful singing, shouting joyfully to you, the Lord of all the earth. We've come to serve you today with gladness, knowing that you are God, that you have made us. We know that you are good, that your lovingkindness is everlasting, and that your and faithfulness extends to all generations.

We love you, Father, and we come to you today through Jesus your only Son. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com