

APPROACHING THE LIVING GOD

Hebrews 12:18-29

First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas

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¹⁸You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. ²⁰(For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death." ²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.") ²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. ²⁵See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven! ²⁶At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven." ²⁷This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; ²⁹for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

People approach God in different ways. Most of us come directly into God's presence, freely, knowing that God awaits us with mercy and love. Some of us, especially if we are going through difficult times may sense God's absence more than an active presence. Very few of us approach God with a sense of foreboding or dread.

The Bible describes all of these approaches to God and many more. There are certainly people in the Bible who have a great sense of fear or "shaking in their boots" when they come into God's presence. There are those who feel forsaken by God's presence, the psalmist declares "why have you forsaken me?". And there are those who feel safe in God's presence, enjoying the personal relationship and appreciating the direct access we have with the living God.

This is what our passage in Hebrews 12 is about today. The epistle to the Hebrews is an interesting although generally unfamiliar letter for today's Christians. The epistle of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were considering giving up their Christian faith. The recipients of this letter faced extreme external pressure. The author's purpose is to encourage these believers to remain faithful to the Christian faith.

The author uses a variety of means to persuade these believers. The lengthy first section from chapters 1 to 10 seeks to show that Christ is superior to the Old Covenant. In chapter 11, which we looked at two weeks ago, the author of Hebrews lists the saints of the Old Testament who

remained faithful to God. And then at the beginning of chapter 12, which we looked at last week, the church is encouraged to run the race with perseverance, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Next week we will look at the very practical implications, the corresponding ethics of the Christian life.

Today's scripture is an interlude of sorts, contrasting two primary ways of approaching the living God. It's an interesting argument. Let's look at it together.

This well-crafted section includes two lengthy sentences and develops an extended contrast between Israel (in the Old Testament) assembled at Mount Sinai to meet God and the new covenant encounter with God that occurs at Mount Zion, the city of the living God (*Letter to the Hebrews* Peter O'Brien p. 477)

When Israel was gathered before the Lord, they were confronted with an awesome appearance of God. Exodus 19:17-19: *"Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln (furnace), while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder."* The Holiness of God was preserved by the exclusion of the people from the holy mountain, while even Moses, who was granted access, was filled with fear and trembling. *"¹⁸You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest."*

By contrast, we have come, verse 22 goes on to say, *"to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem."* The author points us from a physical mountain to a spiritual ideal. The heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God are common expressions in the book of Revelation. For example, Revelation 21:2-3 says: *"I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals."*

Christians have come to the heavenly dwelling place of God, the true and eternal Mount Zion. This is no place of terror but one of joyful celebration. Believers have access to God, and they are enrolled along with angels in the heavenly assembly, while their participation in this gathering and the basis of their joyful confidence is Jesus, the new covenant that he mediates, and his sacrifice by which that covenant was inaugurated (*Letter to the Hebrews* Peter O'Brien p. 478).

The author highlights these different places: Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion. What is at the heart of these two places is the very presence of God. And who is this God? When we think about ways we approach God, probably the most important factor is the nature of God. Who is God? What is God like?

Throughout Hebrews, and reflecting the Old Testament, God is the Holy One. When we say that God is Holy we are saying with Kierkegaard that there is an “infinite qualitative difference” between us and God. God is the “wholly other”. God’s essential being is separate from the creation. We are not the creator. We are not God. The Bible says that God is holy, separate from us, perfect beyond measure. God is the Holy One of Israel.

Many people in our day want a safe God that they can push around or manipulate in a way that’s comfortable for them. The biblical God is not safe. Our God is powerful. A consuming fire, as Hebrews says. But our God is also good.

Our God is not only holy but also personal and loving. We remember the words of Hosea we looked at several weeks ago where God says *“my compassion grows warm and tender...I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst.”* Or as First Epistle of John (4:8-10) says, *“God is Love...God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*

God's love is different from much of our love. If someone hurts us, we naturally do not feel very loving towards them. We find forgiveness hard to come by. God's love on the other hand is motivated by giving. God loves us even when we hurt God. There are times when we do nothing to deserve love. We live our own way, we politely ignore God, we seem so content at keeping God at a distance, away from our lives. What is so radical about God's love is that while we ignore and rebel against God, God still expresses love towards us. *“While we were yet sinners, Romans says, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8).

Have you experienced that love? Do you know that God loves you? The God we come to meet in this worship space this morning has accepted you, forgiven you, will bind up your wounds. Do we really understand that? God loves you. Here's the good news- at the core of God's essential being is not anger, bitterness, neglect, indifference. At the core of the living God's essential being is love.

Both are important- a firm conviction that God is holy and that God is loving. If this is who God is then, what is our response? What is acceptable worship? What does God require of us? To be God-centered in our worship and service means that we consider what pleases God. Not what makes us happy, not what gets our emotions going, not what pleases us. But what pleases God.

If this is who God is, then how should we approach God? What is the best response? As we begin another year in the ministry and worship of God in our congregation, it is good for us to remind ourselves of the best ways to approach the living God.

The author of Hebrews reserves these responses to the very end of our scripture. Verse 28: *“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe.”*

Our first response is **gratitude**. A person can have faith in Christ without having gratitude. Remember the ten lepers that Jesus healed and only one turned back to say thanks. The nine had faith but not gratitude. Faith to be complete must issue forth in gratitude.

Gratitude works wonders in the human soul. When we are grateful, we recognize our proper relationship to the living God. We recognize our dependence. We recognize that all of life is a gift. We see even in the most desperate of situations that God is still at work.

For Christian people, worship is about giving thanks to God. We are thankful for God's great acts of redemption in human history. We also give thanks for God's active presence in our lives right now. For the ways God gives guidance, strengthens our lives, answers our prayers, blesses us with comfort. Gratitude is a Christian virtue that should characterize our worship of the living God.

The second characteristic of Christian worship that is highlighted is **reverence and awe**. Reverence is an attitude towards God. In scripture, fearing God or reverence is a basic, essential response to God. Proverbs 1:7 tells us "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.*" Philippians 2:12 tells us to "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*"

Fearing God is not something we emphasize in our time. Having this tremendous respect, awe, wonder in the face of God's great holiness. Having such reverence that we are willing to follow the commands of God. We are willing to follow, to make commitments that are costly, to take up the challenges out of reverence for God.

Gratitude. Reverence. A third characteristic of acceptable worship is that we are **responsive to God's call**. We listen to God speak and we are responsive to what God asks of us. Throughout the epistle of Hebrews, the people are called again and again to hear and respond to God's voice. Verse 25 of our text says: "*²⁵See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!*" We are called in scripture to act on the word, to be doers of the word and not hearers only.

All of us are called to something. The call may relate to our occupation or not. The call may relate to our family life. A call may relate to our relationships or our ethics. A call may relate to our involvement in the community or a call of service in this church family.

God uses a variety of extraordinary and ordinary means to speak to us. What is essential is whether we are open to God's speaking. For many of us, being in a personal crisis makes us especially sensitive to God's voice. When we get down or overwhelmed, when we are despairing or when we really want to hear then we are open to God speaking.

I believe that God uses the extraordinary at times- burning bushes, dreams, miracles. But generally speaking, God speaks to us through the ordinary. For most of us, God works through our thinking process. As we think through an issue, we find God guiding us. After all, God did create our minds. God certainly speaks to us when we open up the Bible and read the words of scripture. God tends to speak to us when we gather for corporate worship. God speaks to you and me through the words of our friends.

What's critical is our responsiveness to that call. The Bible is full of stories of people who resisted the call. People in the Bible resisted the call by saying: I am too young. I am too old. Or I don't speak very well. Or I have family responsibilities. Or I don't have the right education or qualifications. All of us think we are inadequate at times.

What God does is reassure us: I will be with you. I will give you the words. I will give you the strength to follow me. Go and make disciples, Jesus said, baptizing and teaching but remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.

And so we approach the living God- a God whom we have direct access to; a God who is alive, holy, and loving.

We approach the living God with gratitude, reverence, and an openness to listen and respond to God's voice.

Prayers of the People

What a privilege, Our God, that we can speak to you. Indeed, that you desire that we do speak to you. You are the Holy One, which we often forget. We confess that there are times when we want to bring you down to our size so that we can manage you better. We know in our better moments that you remain transcendent, you are the consuming fire, you continue to make claims upon our lives.

We are grateful too, that you are not removed from our concerns. Since you have become one of us in Jesus of Nazareth you are conscious of our suffering, our aloneness, our sadness. We are grateful that you have empathy and concern for us.

Since you love us, we know you want to help and strengthen us. Sustain the many among us whose physical pains inhibit and slow them up. Give power to the many going through emotional turmoil. Grant your peace to those who are anxious. Bless with your comfort those who are worried and grieving over loved ones.

We pray, Loving God, for the many in our church who begin another year of school this week. We pray for the children of our congregation that you would give them curiosity and help them to discover the joy of learning. We pray for our youth- that you would strengthen them in their faith and relationships as they search for their place in your world. We pray for teachers and staff among us- fill them with strength, patience, guidance, and most of all, deep compassion and love for young people. Bless all, we pray, with a year of growth, service, and meaning. Amen.