

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

R.S.V.P.
Hebrews 12:18-29

In Hebrews we read that our God is an awesome God and don't you forget it. But in that reading we are also reminded not to forget that his all sufficient sacrifice of himself was made in order to allow us to draw near to him.

If we are dealing with a God who cannot be approached by sinners directly without their being destroyed, then what should we expect if, at inestimable personal cost, he has made it possible for us to be in his presence and we reject his invitation? To reject the invitation that has been issued at such great sacrifice is to reject the one who is extending the invitation. In addition, we are rejecting the only means by which we can be in his presence without being destroyed, and therefore, we are placing ourselves back at the foot of Mount Sinai subject to the living God as a consuming fire.

In his commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews, the late Philip Hughes wrote:

Mount Sinai, coming at the very beginning of the years spent in the wilderness, symbolizes not only the Mosaic law-giving and the institution of the Aaronic priesthood but also the wanderings, the non-arrival, of that generation which was under the cloud of condemnation because of its infidelity and ingratitude and which perished in the wilderness; whereas Mount Zion symbolizes the establishment of the unique and everlasting priesthood of Christ, the fulfillment in him of all the promises of the new covenant, the end of wandering, and the entry into the eternal rest prepared for the people of God. (p.544)

In these words we see the intimate relationship of faith and promise in negative relief. Infidelity leads to loss of access to the promise. And in terms of the Exodus, the promise was that God would be their God and they would be his people and dwell among them (Exodus 6:7; 29:45). In terms of the New Testament, the prophecy of the fulfillment of that promise is seen in the Revelation account of the New Jerusalem (21:1-4):

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

This new Jerusalem is the eternal rest prepared for the people of God, as seen in Hebrews 12:22: “*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the City of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...*” By contrast, Mount Sinai is the Old Jerusalem of the Temple and the external law and inaccessibility to God.

At the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews we read that “*in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son*” (1:2). And he spoke to us through his sacrifice by which he invited us to live into the promise he made. Our acceptance of that invitation is by faith, while our refusal is rebellion against the King, which leaves us at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Again, from Hughes:

The blood of Jesus speaks eternal redemption to us (Hebrews 9:12) instead of condemnation, the final putting away of sin (Hebrews 9:16), the purging of evil consciences (Hebrews 10:22), the perfecting and sanctification of all to whom it is applied (Hebrews 10:10,14); it speaks of acceptance instead of rejection (Hebrews 10:19), of blessing instead of cursing; for it is uniquely this blood which cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). Abel’s blood cried out for judgment; but Christ’s blood cries out for mercy and pardon (p.554).

Traditionally, the boundary between the known and the unknown has been depicted as a cliff. We feel that we are on firm footing in what we know, but the unknown is a great abyss. For the Hebrews in the exodus even slavery in Egypt was more attractive than the apparent aimless wandering in the wilderness (Exodus 14:12; 16:3; 17:3). We even have a saying that it is better to live with the devils you know than the devil you don’t. Those who do not have a promise, have no hope and lose all faith. Those who have no faith, lose the promise and have no hope.

For all of us there is a wide chasm between where we are and where God promises we can be. God has told us of the place he wants us to be, we have heard of his kingdom, but we cannot see it. As Jesus told his disciples:

¹“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. ⁴And you know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” ⁶Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:1-6).

Like the disciples, it is as if we are on the edge of a cliff and there is nothing but clouds and fog in view. When we look back we can see Mount Sinai, but ahead, Mount Zion is hidden from our view.

Jesus has issued the invitation and has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. But we cannot see him and touch him. Although he has promised to come back to bring us home, in the meanwhile, he has called us to follow him – follow him to Mount Zion, the New Jerusalem. It is the path that

has brought us to this cliff. And as we stand here peering into the mist, we are to remember the characterization of faith that we read earlier in the letter – *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”* (Hebrews 11:1).

Jesus has promised us that if we follow him we will arrive safely in the New Jerusalem – the dwelling place of God with his people – the very fulfillment of the promise – our ultimate hope. As we stand on the brink of the cliff the battered and bloodied body of our crucified Lord stretches out like a bridge into the clouds and fog. Do we dare step onto that apparently gossamer path in the clouds or do we elect to stay firmly rooted on the ground? Do we follow our Lord or refuse the invitation of the King?

The costly invitation has been offered and an R.S.V.P. is required. The language of response for a kingdom invitation is either “faith” or “no faith.” And in the kingdom, no response, or a faith not acted upon, is no faith. To regret to the invitation is to reject the living God and return to the terrors of destruction at the foot of Mount Sinai. In contrast, our faith is our acceptance and it means totally depending upon the sacrificed Messiah as the realization of the hope which is the promise. Citizenship in the New Jerusalem and dwelling with God on Mount Zion is offered by the grace of God and ours by faith.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, you have sent your Son to die as one of us so that we might live as your sons. Through him you have made the promise of living with you eternally a possibility. We thank you for your promise and the provision for fulfilling that promise. May we turn away from our selfishness and fear and turn to you in love and faith. Today we place our lives in your hands, acknowledging you as our Lord and pledging to follow you in faith. Amen.

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, on August 22, 2010, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16, Year C.