

Sermon: "Our God is a Consuming Fire"
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Hebrews 12:18-25

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, 19 and 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." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear.")

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and 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, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

25 See 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!

26 At 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." 27 This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

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; 29 for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

THE GODFORSAKEN WILDERNESS

Long ago God delivered his people from slavery in the land of Egypt.

But, freedom came with a steep price.
In order to leave the slavery of Egypt, God's people had to pass through the wilderness.

And for many the wilderness was a frightening place. They had no food or water.
They didn't know where they were going.

Out of fear, some even wanted to go back to Egypt.
They were slaves in Egypt, but at least they had food to eat.

These fearful refugees rebelled against Moses.
They asked him why he had led them into this godforsaken place to die.

What they were about to learn, of course, was that the wilderness wasn't godforsaken.

In fact they were not far from the Mount of God's Presence.

Whenever God's people are in the wilderness, there is always a struggle to believe in the goodness of God.

That's true for us today and that was also true for those who first heard the message of Hebrews. In the wilderness of persecution and hostility many were growing weary and losing heart.

In our lesson last week the author of Hebrews assured this fearful band of pilgrims that they were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.
He encouraged them to look to the example and encouragement of faithful people, past and present as a source of encouragement as they ran their own life race.

But, I suspect many did not feel like they were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.
In an increasingly hostile world, they were tempted to think that they were all alone.

They were beginning to wonder if the world really was godforsaken after all.

The author of Hebrews wanted to remind this struggling congregation that God had not abandoned them.

On the contrary, as it had happened in the past, the struggle of the wilderness could even bring them closer to God.

In fact, like God's children in the past, their wilderness journey might even be bringing them close to very presence of God.

The Bible teaches us that the Mountain of God's presence is found in those very places that the world calls godforsaken.

A FIERY MOUNTAIN IN THE WILDERNESS

Coming close to God is not easy.
The mountain of the Lord can be a frightening place.

That's how we begin our lesson for today.
We join the pilgrims in the wilderness, and we see the Holy Mountain.

So what does it look like?

It is a blazing fire.
It is a place of deep darkness and gloom.

It is a place where storms rage.
On the mountain, the trumpet of creation sounds a fearful note.

And on the mountain God speaks a word causes people to fall to their knees and tremble.
Even Moses was terrified by the sight and sound of this mountain.

The mountain is so holy that if an animal or human touches it, they will die.

What is God up to with this journey into the wilderness?

Put yourself in the shoes of God's people.
They are all alone in the wilderness without food or water.
They don't know where they are going.

And now they come to a mountain that scares them out of their wits.
 What's going on here?
 Why did God insist on taking his people to this frightening place?

True worship begins with reverence and awe.
 And the holy mountain of the Lord instilled that reverence and awe in God's people.
 On the mountain God's people received the commandments, and it was this way of life that made them different from all the other peoples of the world.

They were chosen by God to bring a new Word to the world.
 I believe that the journey of faith still begins at the Holy Mountain.
 On this mountain we learn what it means to truly worship, and we receive the Word of God that changes us forever.

FEAR AND WISDOM

The words of the Psalmist give us a good interpretation of this passage.
 He wrote,
 "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
 all those who practice it have a good understanding." (Psalm 111:10)

Understanding the Lord begins with an appreciation of God's holiness.

And notice that this sense of holiness can be cultivated.
 The Psalmist said that the fear of the Lord can be *practiced*,
 "all those who practice (the fear of the Lord) have a good understanding."

What does that mean?
 How can we practice the fear of the Lord?
 We practice the fear of the Lord through worship.

That's the reason we are here today.
 We have come to practice, to remember and take to heart the holiness of God.

The catechism teaches us that the chief end of men and women is to glorify God.
 In other words, our primary purpose in life is to worship God.

If we do that, everything else will fall into place.

So, our first stop in the journey of faith is the Lord's holy mountain.
 We practice the presence of God.
 We need to come to that place where the word of God shatters the silence,
 and we tremble at God's holiness.

At this point I think it's important to notice where faith does *not* begin.
 Faith does *not* begin with our life and our needs.
 Faith does not begin in a place of comfort and self-assurance.

Faith begins in the wilderness, our wilderness.

Faith begins when God leads us to that disturbing place of worship.
 Faith begins when we tremble at the sights and sounds of creation.
 Faith begins when the word of the Lord shakes us to our very core.

OUR GOD IS A CONSUMING FIRE

Faith begins when we learn in our heart of hearts,
 "Our God is a consuming fire."

Do you believe that?
 Do you believe that our God is a consuming fire?
 It's in the Bible. It's in our lesson for today, verse 29.
 I'm not making this stuff up.

I suspect that most of us are not comfortable with that description of God.
 You probably want me to emphasize some other verse in our lesson.

But, the verse is there.
 What does it mean?
 What does it mean when we say that our God is a consuming fire?

It means that the presence of the Almighty reminds us of our sinfulness.

When the prophet Isaiah when he was in the Temple, he saw a vision of
 God high and lifted up. Do you remember how he responded to this vi-
 sion?

He said,

“Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

For Isaiah, God was a consuming fire.

But, here’s the good news.

This was not the end of his story.

That awe inspiring encounter with the living God was the first step in a greater journey of faith.

The heavenly messenger would enable Isaiah to overcome the guilt of his sin.

And Isaiah would go on to deliver an important message of judgment and hope to God’s people.

But, more importantly, through the Spirit inspired message of Isaiah, the world would learn of a hope that was eternal.

REVERENCE AND AWE

We should use these biblical images like these in our own worship of God.

The presence of God should evoke images of smoke and fire.

The presence of God should be likened to a raging storm.

And the word of God that challenges the injustice of the world should sound like the clarion call of a trumpet.

This is what it means to really worship God.

Worshipping God is serious business.

Verse 28 of today’s lesson tells us that truly acceptable worship is worship that is filled with reverence and awe.

Sadly, much of what passes for worship these days does not evoke reverence and awe.

The problem is not the style of worship.

The problem is in our hearts.

We do not take worship seriously enough.
We do not imagine a God who is high and lifted up.

Our God is not an awesome God.
Our God is a comfortable domesticated God.

One author suggests that we are like children playing with dynamite.
We have no understanding of the power we invoke when we worship God.

She says that if we truly understood the holiness of God we would pass out
crash helmets along with the bulletin and equip our pews with seat belts!

Our God is a consuming fire.
And somehow we need to get that fact into our hearts and our lives.
We have to learn how to worship God with reverence and awe.

This passage illustrates a way to do that.
We use stories and images found in the Bible to evoke that feeling.

When we read about these mighty acts of God in the past, we need to read
ourselves into the story. We use our imagination to practice the fear of the
Lord, the beginning of wisdom and the wellspring of true worship.

FIRE AND NEW LIFE

God is described as a consuming fire, but this describes more than the
punishment of God.
It also describes purification.

We are purified when we come close to the white hot presence of the
Almighty.

Fire refines metal, and in the passage that precedes our lesson, the author
of Hebrews suggests that the fiery trials of God's people will, in the long
run, strengthen their faith.
Their faith will be tested and proved by the difficulties of life.

They will not die in the wilderness.
The wilderness will be the place where they come face to face with their
God.

It was the struggles in the wilderness that helped God's people first learned to trust God.

In the wilderness, God's consuming fire burned up the old way of life so that a new life could be possible in the Promised Land.

That's why the author of Hebrews talks not only about Mount Sinai but also about Mount Zion.

God's people faced the fearful mountain of God in the wilderness.

But, it was only a stop on the way to something greater.

In the Promised Land they were able to worship God in Jerusalem on Mount Zion.

Mount Zion represents the coming of God's awesome kingdom in glory. In our lesson for today, the author of Hebrews tells his congregation that they have made it through the wilderness. And now they have arrived at Mount Zion.

Mount Zion is also filled with God's presence.

It is the city of the living God.

But, the description of this mount is different from the mountain in the wilderness.

It is filled with angels.

It is where God's children come to celebrate God's forgiveness.

The author remembers the blood of Abel.

When Cain killed his brother Abel, that act followed him the rest of his life.

Indeed the killing of his brother represents the curse of humanity.

To this day we treat each other with callous disregard.

(The atrocities in Syria bear witness to that all too well.)

But, according to the author of Hebrews, this violent way of life is on the way out.

The kingdom of God is coming.

And in the new Jerusalem the blood of Abel will no longer hold sway.

In the new Jerusalem there will be a new covenant, a new way of life based upon God's grace and forgiveness as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The sprinkled blood of Jesus will prove to be a better word.
And the cycle of violence will be interrupted by the powerful word of God's
hope and forgiveness.

SHAKING THINGS UP TODAY

Now we know that this word of hope does not end the struggle.
We still have a long way to go.
Sadly the forces of evil are stronger than ever.

The coming of Jesus did not end the need for worship.
It intensified it.

The God revealed in Jesus not only shakes the earth but also shakes the
heavens.
There is a new creation coming, and the birth pangs of that new creation
are just beginning.

God is making a new heaven and a new earth.
And we get to be part of the revolution.

This message is both a word of judgment and a word of promise.
In order to bring the new kingdom the old kingdom has to go.
In order to bring us a new way of life the old way of life has to be aban-
doned.

Our God is a consuming fire.
He is burning up the old in order to make way for the new.

This is an election year, and every time we have an election the candidates
out of power promise the same thing, change.

That's always a powerful message.
We long for things to be different.
We want to believe that someone has the ability to bring about real change
and make things better.

But, most of the time we are disappointed.
The change we long for does not happen.

Some of the blame can be laid at the feet of flawed leaders.
They promise more than they can deliver.

But, I wonder if part of the problem is due to the fact that we are not really willing to accept change. We are afraid to take the bold steps necessary to create a new way of life.

And on our own change is not possible.
Only God can truly change us.

You see, the kingdom of God is about more than just tinkering around the edges.
The kingdom of God is about more than just trying harder and doing more.

The kingdom of God is about totally shaking things up.
The kingdom of God is about turning things inside out and upside down.
The kingdom of God is a consuming fire.

That kind of change cannot happen through politics or any human activity.
That kind of change only comes from above.
That's the kind of change we really need.

And we connect with this heavenly change through worship.
When we stand with reverence and awe on God's holy mountain, we begin to see our world and ourselves in a new way.

We begin to catch a glimpse (as did Abraham) of a city with a solid foundation, whose builder and architect is God.

We begin to get a glimpse (as did Isaiah) of a Savior who can take away our sin.

We begin to get a glimpse of a kingdom that cannot be shaken ... a new creation ... a shining city on the hill.

Through the eyes of faith we can imagine the change that God is going to make through the work of His Spirit. And we are encouraged to live according to the rules of the kingdom that comes rather than living by the rules of the powers that be.

That's worship.
And that's job one in the church.

FALSE ADVERTISING

T.S. Eliot, one of the most influential poets of the 20th century liked to tell about a sign outside a baker's shop advertising bread for one dollar a loaf.

You go into the shop, he said, hungry for bread and imagining the fresh smell of bread right out of the oven. You are starving and can't wait to eat it.

However, to your dismay, you find that inside the shop all that is for sale are copies of the sign advertising bread.

Eliot suggested that the church is often like that imaginary shop. We offer the world a sign instead of the real thing.

We need more than signs advertising bread.
We need bread.
We need the bread of of life.

If we are not filled with the Spirit of the living God, we lack power.
And we cannot satisfy a world that is hungry for God.

This God that calls us to worship in Spirit and in Truth.

This God fills us with reverence and awe.

The Advent hymn give us a proper response to this vision,

"Let all mortal flesh keep silence."
Be quiet. Be still. And listen to God.

True worship can change our lives, our churches and our society.

One commentator put it well,
"The foundation of Christian view of ethics ... begins in worship, in the sometimes dark, passionate, scary fiery tempest of God" colliding with his people on Sunday.

Let us worship God.

Please put you tray tables in their upright and fastened positions, don't forget to fasten your seat belts, and don your crash helmets.

After all ... our God is a consuming fire.

May our hearts be set aflame this day.

Amen.